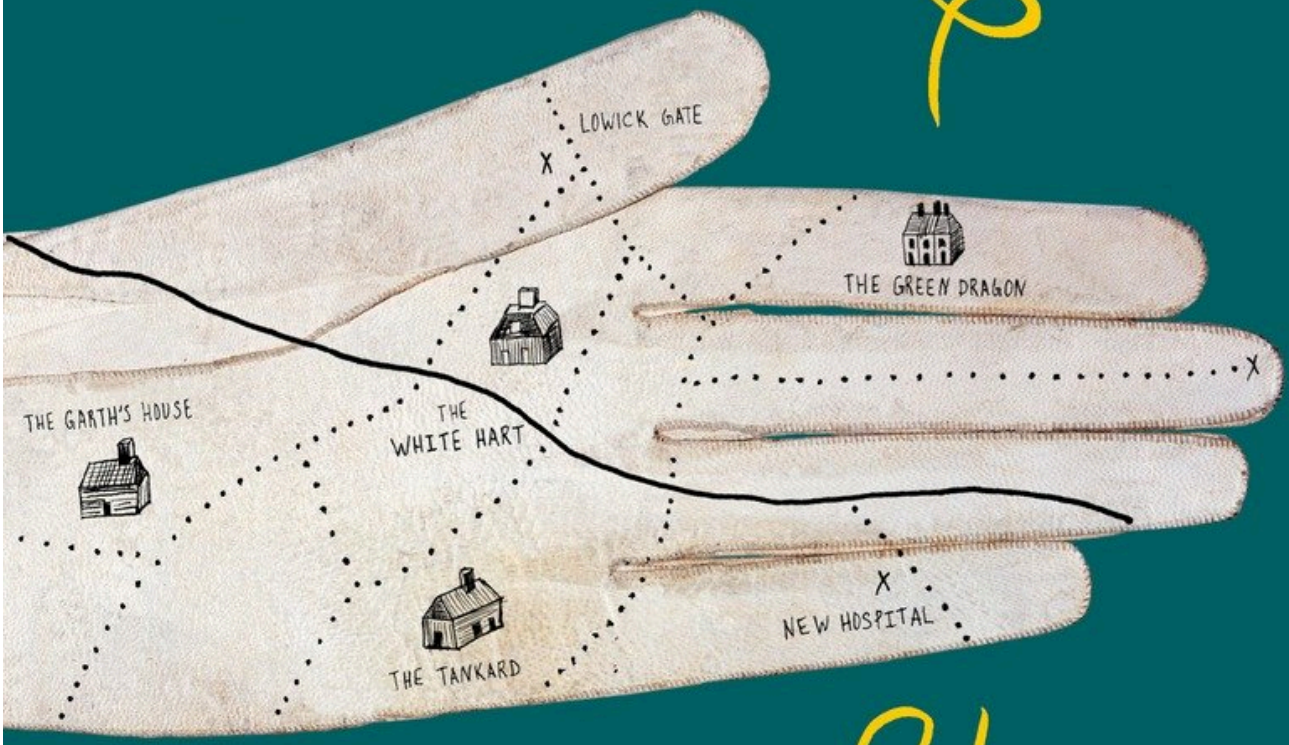
MIDDLEMARCH



George Eliot

Foreword by
Rebecca
Mead

Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition

MIDDLEMARCH

Considered one of the masterpieces of realist fiction, George Eliot's *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* explores a fictional nineteenth-century Midlands town in the midst of modern changes. The proposed Reform Bill promises political change; the building of railroads alters both the physical and cultural landscape; new scientific approaches to medicine incite public division; and scandal lurks behind respectability. The quiet drama of ordinary lives and flawed choices plays out in the complexly portrayed central characters of the novel—the idealistic Dorothea Brooke, the ambitious Dr. Lydgate, the spendthrift Fred Vincy, and the steadfast Mary Garth. The appearance of two outsiders further disrupts the town's equilibrium—Will Ladislaw, the spirited nephew of Dorothea's husband, the Rev. Edward Casaubon, and the sinister John Raffles, who threatens to expose the hidden past of one of the town's elite. *Middlemarch* displays George Eliot's clear-eyed yet humane understanding of characters caught up in the mysterious unfolding of self-knowledge.

"*Middlemarch*, the magnificent book which with all its imperfections, is one of the few English novels written for grown-up people."

—VIRGINIA WOOLF

"The most profound, wise and absorbing of English novels . . . and, above all, truthful and forgiving about human behaviour."

—HERMIONE LEE

PENGUIN CLASSICS DELUXE EDITION

MIDDLEMARCH

GEORGE ELIOT is the pen name of Mary Ann (Marian) Evans, born in Warwickshire in 1819. Marian left school at age sixteen, when her mother died, to keep house for her father. She then began a self-education that included Latin, Greek, and philosophy. When she and her father moved to Coventry, she became friendly with local philanthropists Charles and Clara Bray, who introduced her to progressive figures such as Robert Owen and Harriet Martineau, as well as to more liberal religious views. Her first major literary effort was an English translation of Strauss's *Life of Jesus* (1846), commissioned by the radical publisher John Chapman. When he became the owner and editor of the *Westminster Review* in 1851, Chapman invited Marian to London to become his managing editor. Her role at a major literary journal was quite unusual for a woman in the nineteenth century. Convinced of the novel's potential as high art, Marian began writing fiction, encouraged by George Henry Lewes, the versatile man of letters with whom she lived openly (although Lewes was already married and unable to divorce) until his death in 1878. Under the name George Eliot, she published her first collection of short stories, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858) and her first full-length novel, *Adam Bede* (1859). In addition to poetry, many reviews, essays, and articles, she wrote six more novels—*The Mill on the Floss* (1860), *Silas Marner* (1861), *Romola* (1863), *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1871–72), and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). She died in 1880 after a brief marriage to an old friend, J. W. Cross, who became her biographer. She was buried besides Lewes in Highgate.

REBECCA MEAD is a staff writer for *The New Yorker* and the author of the bestselling memoir *My Life in Middlemarch*. She lives in Brooklyn with her family.

GEORGE ELIOT

MIDDLEMARCH

A Study of Provincial Life

Foreword by

REBECCA MEAD



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FINALE

Foreword

One of the most memorable minor characters in *Middlemarch* is Mr. Borthrop Trumbull, the auctioneer: a prosperous, confident burgher of George Eliot's fictional town, who "would have liked to have the universe under his hammer, feeling that it would go at a higher figure for his recommendation." Mr. Trumbull's confidence and wit came to my mind a few years ago when I visited Bonhams, an auction house in New York, to attend a sale of nineteenth-century books and manuscripts. It was a less jovial affair than the auction described in Chapter 60 of *Middlemarch*—at which the auctioneer's professional enthusiasm was "distributed on the equitable principle of praising those things most which were most in need of praise"—but its contents were more consequential: it included first editions of novels by Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope.

The reason I was there was to observe the fate of lot number 88—a first edition of *Middlemarch*, which had been published in eight novella-sized volumes over the course of a year, beginning in December 1871. This edition of *Middlemarch*—which has pale green paper covers that are decorated with a rural illustration and bordered with a delicate floral pattern—doesn't come on the market very often, and I thought that seeing one in a display case was about as close as I was ever likely to get. Only six thousand copies were printed at the time of publication, and few have survived intact. Some readers had them bound into a single volume to add to their libraries. But others tossed them out like last month's magazine, or read them so avidly that they simply fell apart.

The original price, set by George Eliot's publisher, William Blackwood, had been five shillings per volume: two pounds for the entire set. The bidding at Bonhams began at twenty-five thousand dollars; with several buyers competing, it quickly reached a hammer price of forty-five thousand dollars. (With the buyer's premium, the total came to just over fifty-six thousand dollars.) The highest bid came from a rare-books dealer. I approached him in the lobby after the sale, introduced myself, and remarked ruefully that I wished I had forty-five thousand dollars to spend on it. "You do," he told me. "You just need to reorder your priorities."

I've thought of that encounter often since—not because I've recalibrated my personal finances, but because I've pondered how best to respond to people who tell me that they'd like to read *Middlemarch*, or have even tried to read *Middlemarch*, but have found it too long, too daunting, too hard, too time-consuming. *Middlemarch* has accrued such literary gravity—it is regularly included on lists of the greatest novels ever written, often in the number-one slot—that it can be easy to forget the circumstances of its publication. Back in the early 1870s it was merely the latest work by England's greatest living novelist. Each of these slender green volumes presented readers not with an onerous cultural obligation, but with an eagerly anticipated pleasure.

"We all read it, and all feel that there is nothing to compare with it appearing at the present moment in the way of English literature," wrote a reviewer for *The Spectator* after the publication of the fourth volume, in June 1872. "Not a few of us calculate whether we shall get the August number before we go for our autumn holiday, or whether we shall have to wait for it till we return." One way to approach the book today might be to think of it not as an intimidating, monolithic entity, but as its original readers experienced it—as eight utterly manageable short books to be read over the leisurely course of a year. Another way might be to admit that you *do* have time to read an eight-hundred-page book, perhaps even according to a swifter timetable than that of George Eliot's first readers. You just need to reorder your priorities.

The first time I read *Middlemarch* it was in the very short space of two weeks, when I was seventeen years old. I know exactly how long it took me, because at the time I listed in a notebook every book I read upon completion. (Immediately before *Middlemarch* came Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*; after finishing it, I moved on to Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned*.) Looking over this notebook today makes me wish I could restore my younger self's powers of concentration: I'm sure I couldn't manage that pace of reading now, especially not with a full load of schoolwork to do as well. But it also reminds me, in a way that gives me a visceral pang, of the achingly long hours of adolescence, of all that time spent waiting for life to begin.

My first copy of *Middlemarch* was a Penguin English Library edition; on its cover was a detail from a nineteenth-century painting that is in the collection of the Tate museum. It shows a figure of a young woman in a full white skirt and a black tunic, ascending a couple of stone steps in approach to a stile, and looking beyond her to a wooded copse on a hill. May I confess that it is not until this very moment—having pulled my by now very battered copy from the shelf for what might be the millionth time—that I have noticed there are several other figures in the distance, on the hillside? My first reading of *Middlemarch* was as a young woman living in a provincial town in a rural part of England. I was surrounded by landscapes like that on the cover of the book, and I was desperate to escape to somewhere else—an indeterminate place in which, I imagined, life would be more cultured and much more exciting. Of course I only saw a solitary figure in the picture. She was me—a woman at the outset of her life, ambitious for something she couldn't quite define, looking for a different prospect somewhere beyond her line of sight.

The mark of a great work of literature is that a reader can return to it at different stages of life and find new resonances and meanings in its pages. I've returned to *Middlemarch* many times in the three decades since that first encounter, and each time it looks different. Virginia Woolf delivered the most celebrated verdict upon the novel almost fifty years after its publication: she called it "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people." But it's also a book to grow up with.

On my first encounter, I identified with its heroine, Dorothea Brooke, who is an ardent young woman living in the English provinces, hoping to find something to do with her life that will give it purpose and meaning. Fifteen years later—by which time I had escaped not just my narrow hometown but my country, having moved to New York and become a journalist—I found myself newly unsettled by the fate of Tertius Lydgate, the young doctor who intends to make great advances in medicine, and whose achievements fall well short of his aspirations. And by forty-five, the story of Edward Casaubon—the desiccated, emotionally timid, prematurely elderly scholar whom Dorothea makes the mistake of marrying at the outset of the novel—had become considerably more poignant. Casaubon's failures are much harder to judge when you've had time to accomplish some failures of your own.

Returning to *Middlemarch* in middle age, what strikes me is the scope and the sympathy with which Eliot depicts her characters' varying trials as they make their way through what she calls "the home epic"—a magnificent turn of phrase that perfectly captures the way in which the everyday experiences of love, work, and family relations marry the mundane and the sublime. What I am moved by now in *Middlemarch* is not just the epic dimension of Dorothea's or Lydgate's aspirations, but the way that the novel tenderly pays tribute to home as the seeding ground of character. One thing that *Middlemarch* illuminates for me now is the debt I owe to where I am from, and the gratitude I bear to those around me—both in the past, and in the present home I have made for myself, far from where I began.

Part of what it means to grow up is that a person undergoes a movement away from an immature self-involvement, into more sympathetic recognition of the differing internal experiences of others. Eliot hoped that her books would urge that process along, by literary means: she once remarked that what she aimed for in her fiction was "the presentation of mixed human beings in such a way as to call forth tolerant judgment, pity, and sympathy." A really great novel can work in this uncanny way upon us. It can give us the sense that *we* are being read by *it*—that we are being moved to new understandings of ourselves, and of those people around us.

Dorothea herself undergoes this transformation from self-centeredness to empathy within the pages of *Middlemarch*. There is a passage toward the end of the novel in which she is gazing out of her window and sees figures moving in the distance—a man with a bundle on his back, a woman carrying her baby. The sight is an epiphany, and moves Dorothea to action. "She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining," Eliot writes. By the end of the book, Dorothea has reordered her priorities; and if I can now see the figures in the painting on the cover of my first copy of *Middlemarch*—if I notice the man with the bundle on his back, and the woman by his side, who were invisible to me before—I think it is because *Middlemarch* has also reordered mine.

REBECCA MEAD

A Note on the Text

This edition of *Middlemarch* is based on the original one-volume edition published in 1874 by William Blackwood and Sons, London, the last edition corrected and revised by George Eliot. A few printer errors have been corrected.

Interested readers should turn to the Penguin Classics edition of *Middlemarch* (2003) for an introduction and notes by Rosemary Ashton.

Prelude

Who that cares much to know the history of man, and how the mysterious mixture behaves under the varying experiments of Time, has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa, has not smiled with some gentleness at the thought of the little girl walking forth one morning hand in hand with her still smaller brother to go and seek martyrdom in the country of the Moors? Out they toddled from rugged Avila, wide-eyed and helpless looking as two fawns, but with human hearts, already beating to a national idea, until domestic reality met them in the shape of uncles and turned them back from their great resolve. That child-pilgrimage was a fit beginning. Theresa's passionate, ideal nature demanded an epic life: what were many-volumed romances of chivalry and the social conquests of a brilliant girl to her? Her flame quickly burned up that light fuel, and fed from within, soared after some illimitable satisfaction, some object which would never justify weariness, which would reconcile self-despair with the rapturous consciousness of life beyond self. She found her epos in the reform of a religious order.

That Spanish woman who lived three hundred years ago was certainly not the last of her kind. Many Theresas have been born who found for themselves no epic life wherein there was a constant unfolding of far-resonant action; perhaps only a life of mistakes, the offspring of a certain spiritual grandeur ill-matched with the meanness of opportunity; perhaps a tragic failure which found no sacred poet and sank unwept into oblivion. With dim lights and tangled circumstance they tried to shape their thought and deed in noble agreement; but after all, to common eyes their struggles seemed mere inconsistency and formlessness; for these later-born Theresas were helped by no coherent social faith and order which could perform the function of knowledge for the ardently willing soul. Their ardour alternated between a vague ideal and the common yearning of womanhood, so that the one was disapproved as extravagance and the other condemned as a lapse.

Some have felt that these blundering lives are due to the inconvenient indefiniteness with which the Supreme Power has fashioned the natures of women: if there were one level of feminine incompetence as strict as the ability to count three and no more, the social lot of women might be treated with scientific certitude. Meanwhile the indefiniteness remains, and the limits of variation are really much wider than anyone would imagine from the sameness of women's coiffure and the favourite love-stories in prose and verse. Here and there a cygnet is reared uneasily among the ducklings in the brown pond, and never finds the living stream in fellowship with its own oary-footed kind. Here and there is born a Saint Theresa, foundress of nothing, whose loving heartbeats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances instead of centring in some long-recognizable deed.

BOOK I

MISS BROOKE

CHAPTER 1

Since I can do no good because a woman,
Reach constantly at something that is near it.

—*The Maid's Tragedy*: BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER

Miss Brooke had that kind of beauty which seems to be thrown into relief by poor dress. Her hand and wrist were so finely formed that she could wear sleeves not less bare of style than those in which the blessed Virgin appeared to Italian painters; and her profile as well as her stature and bearing seemed to gain the more dignity from her plain garments, which by the side of provincial fashion gave her the impressiveness of a fine quotation from the Bible—or from one of our elder poets—in a paragraph of today's newspaper. She was usually spoken of as being remarkably clever, but with the addition that her sister Celia had more common sense. Nevertheless, Celia wore scarcely more trimmings, and it was only to close observers that her dress differed from her sister's and had a shade of coquetry in its arrangements; for Miss Brooke's plain dressing was due to mixed conditions, in most of which her sister shared. The pride of being ladies had something to do with it: the Brooke connexions, though not exactly aristocratic, were unquestionably "good"; if you inquired backward for a generation or two, you would not find any yard-measuring or parcel-tying forefathers—anything lower than an admiral or clergyman; and there was even an ancestor discernible as a Puritan gentleman who served under Cromwell but afterwards conformed and managed to come out of all political troubles as the proprietor of a respectable family estate. Young women of such birth, living in a quiet country-house and attending a village church hardly larger than a parlour, naturally regarded frippery as the ambition of a huckster's daughter. Then there was well-bred economy, which in those days made show in dress the first item to be deducted from when any margin was required for expenses more distinctive of rank. Such reasons would have been enough to account for plain dress, quite apart from religious feeling; but in Miss Brooke's case, religion alone would have determined it, and Celia mildly acquiesced in all her sister's sentiments, only infusing them with that common sense which is able to accept momentous doctrines without any eccentric agitation. Dorothea knew many passages of Pascal's *Penseés* and of Jeremy Taylor by heart; and to her the destinies of mankind, seen by the light of Christianity, made the solicitudes of feminine fashion appear an occupation for Bedlam. She could not reconcile the anxieties of a spiritual life involving eternal consequences with a keen interest in guimp and artificial protrusions of drapery. Her mind was theoretic and yearned by its nature after some lofty conception of the world which might frankly include the parish of Tipton and her own rule of conduct there; she was enamoured of intensity and greatness and rash in embracing whatever seemed to her to have those aspects; likely to seek martyrdom, to make retractations, and then to incur martyrdom after all in a quarter where she had not sought it. Certainly such elements in the character of a marriageable girl tended to interfere with her lot and hinder it from being decided according to custom, by good looks, vanity, and merely canine affection. With all this, she, the elder of the sisters, was not yet twenty, and they had both been educated since they were about twelve years old and had lost their parents on plans at once narrow and promiscuous, first in an English family and afterwards in a Swiss family at Lausanne, their bachelor uncle and guardian trying in this way to remedy the disadvantages of their orphaned condition.

It was hardly a year since they had come to live at Tipton Grange with their uncle, a man nearly sixty, of acquiescent temper, miscellaneous opinions, and uncertain vote. He had travelled in his younger years, and was held in this part of the county to have contracted a too rambling habit of mind. Mr. Brooke's conclusions were as difficult to predict as the weather: it was only safe to say that he would act with benevolent intentions and that he would spend as little money as possible in carrying them out. For the most glutinously indefinite minds enclose some hard grains of habit; and a man has been seen lax about all his own interests except the retention of his snuff-box, concerning which he was watchful, suspicious, and greedy of clutch.

In Mr. Brooke the hereditary strain of Puritan energy was clearly in abeyance, but in his niece Dorothea it glowed alike through faults and virtues, turning sometimes into impatience of her uncle's talk or his way of "letting things be" on his estate and making her long all the more for the time when she would be of age and have some command of money for generous schemes. She was regarded as an heiress; for not only had the sisters seven hundred a year each from their parents, but if Dorothea married and had a son, that son would inherit Mr. Brooke's estate, presumably worth about three thousand a year—a rental which seemed wealth to provincial families, still discussing Mr. Peel's late conduct on the Catholic Question, innocent of future goldfields and of that gorgeous plutocracy which has so nobly exalted the necessities of genteel life.

And how should Dorothea not marry—a girl so handsome and with such prospects? Nothing could hinder it but her love of extremes and her insistence on regulating life according to notions which might cause a wary man to hesitate before he had made her an offer, or even might lead her at last to refuse all offers. A young lady of some birth and fortune who knelt suddenly down on a brick floor by the side of a sick labourer and prayed fervidly as if she thought herself living in the time of the Apostles—who had strange whims of fasting like a papist and of sitting up at night to read old theological books! Such a wife might awaken you some fine morning with a new scheme for the application of her income which would interfere with political economy and the keeping of saddle-horses: a man would naturally think twice before he risked

himself in such fellowship. Women were expected to have weak opinions, but the great safeguard of society and of domestic life was that opinions were not acted on. Sane people did what their neighbours did so that if any lunatics were at large, one might know and avoid them.

The rural opinion about the new young ladies, even among the cottagers, was generally in favour of Celia as being so amiable and innocent looking, while Miss Brooke's large eyes seemed, like her religion, too unusual and striking. Poor Dorothea! Compared with her, the innocent-looking Celia was knowing and worldly wise, so much subtler is a human mind than the outside tissues which make a sort of blazonry or clock-face for it.

Yet those who approached Dorothea, though prejudiced against her by this alarming hearsay, found that she had a charm unaccountably reconcilable with it. Most men thought her bewitching when she was on horseback. She loved the fresh air and the various aspects of the country, and when her eyes and cheeks glowed with mingled pleasure she looked very little like a devotee. Riding was an indulgence which she allowed herself in spite of conscientious qualms; she felt that she enjoyed it in a pagan, sensuous way, and always looked forward to renouncing it.

She was open, ardent, and not in the least self-admiring; indeed, it was pretty to see how her imagination adorned her sister, Celia, with attractions altogether superior to her own, and if any gentleman appeared to come to the Grange from some other motive than that of seeing Mr. Brooke, she concluded that he must be in love with Celia: Sir James Chettam, for example, whom she constantly considered from Celia's point of view, inwardly debating whether it would be good for Celia to accept him. That he should be regarded as a suitor to herself would have seemed to her a ridiculous irrelevance. Dorothea, with all her eagerness to know the truths of life, retained very childlike ideas about marriage. She felt sure that she would have accepted the judicious Hooker if she had been born in time to save him from that wretched mistake he made in matrimony; or John Milton when his blindness had come on; or any of the other great men whose odd habits it would have been glorious piety to endure; but an amiable, handsome baronet, who said "Exactly" to her remarks even when she expressed uncertainty—how could he affect her as a lover? The really delightful marriage must be that where your husband was a sort of father and could teach you even Hebrew if you wished it.

These peculiarities of Dorothea's character caused Mr. Brooke to be all the more blamed in neighbouring families for not securing some middle-aged lady as guide and companion to his nieces. But he himself dreaded so much the sort of superior woman likely to be available for such a position that he allowed himself to be dissuaded by Dorothea's objections, and was in this case brave enough to defy the world—that is to say, Mrs. Cadwallader the rector's wife, and the small group of gentry with whom he visited in the north-east corner of Loamshire. So Miss Brooke presided in her uncle's household and did not at all dislike her new authority, with the homage that belonged to it.

Sir James Chettam was going to dine at the Grange today with another gentleman whom the girls had never seen and about whom Dorothea felt some venerating expectation. This was the Reverend Edward Casaubon, noted in the county as a man of profound learning, understood for many years to be engaged on a great work concerning religious history; also as a man of wealth enough to give lustre to his piety, and having views of his own which were to be more clearly ascertained on the publication of his book. His very name carried an impressiveness hardly to be measured without a precise chronology of scholarship.

Early in the day Dorothea had returned from the infant school which she had set going in the village and was taking her usual place in the pretty sitting-room which divided the bedrooms of the sisters, bent on finishing a plan for some buildings (a kind of work which she delighted in), when Celia, who had been watching her with a hesitating desire to propose something, said, "Dorothea dear, if you don't mind—if you are not very busy—suppose we looked at Mamma's jewels today, and divided them? It is exactly six months today since Uncle gave them to you, and you have not looked at them yet."

Celia's face had the shadow of a pouting expression in it, the full presence of the pout being kept back by an habitual awe of Dorothea and principle; two associated facts which might show a mysterious electricity if you touched them incautiously. To her relief, Dorothea's eyes were full of laughter as she looked up.

"What a wonderful little almanac you are, Celia! Is it six calendar or six lunar months?"

"It is the last day of September now, and it was the first of April when Uncle gave them to you. You know, he said that he had forgotten them till then. I believe you have never thought of them since you locked them up in the cabinet here."

"Well, dear, we should never wear them, you know." Dorothea spoke in a full cordial tone, half caressing, half explanatory. She had her pencil in her hand and was making tiny side-plans on a margin.

Celia coloured and looked very grave. "I think, dear, we are wanting in respect to Mamma's memory to put them by and take no notice of them. And," she added, after hesitating a little, with a rising sob of mortification, "necklaces are quite usual now; and Madame Poinçon, who was stricter in some things even than you are, used to wear ornaments. And Christians generally—surely there are women in heaven now who wore jewels." Celia was conscious of some mental strength when she really applied herself to argument.

"You would like to wear them?" exclaimed Dorothea, an air of astonished discovery animating her whole person with a dramatic action which she had caught from that very Madame Poinçon who wore the ornaments. "Of course, then, let us have them out. Why did you not tell me before? But the keys, the keys!" She pressed her hands against the sides of her head and seemed to despair of her memory.

"They are here," said Celia, with whom this explanation had been long meditated and prearranged.

"Pray open the large drawer of the cabinet and get out the jewel-box."

The casket was soon open before them and the various jewels spread out, making a bright parterre on the table. It was no great collection, but a few of the ornaments were really of remarkable beauty, the finest that was obvious at first being a necklace of purple amethysts set in exquisite gold work and a pearl cross with five brilliants in it. Dorothea immediately took up the necklace and fastened it round her sister's neck, where it fitted almost as closely as a bracelet; but the circle suited the Henrietta-Maria style of Celia's head and neck, and she could see that it did in the pier-glass opposite.

"There, Celia! You can wear that with your Indian muslin. But this cross you must wear with your dark dresses."

Celia was trying not to smile with pleasure. "Oh, Dodo, you must keep the cross yourself."

“No, no, dear, no,” said Dorothea, putting up her hand with careless deprecation.

“Yes, indeed you must; it would suit you—in your black dress, now,” said Celia insistingly. “You *might* wear that.”

“Not for the world, not for the world. A cross is the last thing I would wear as a trinket.” Dorothea shuddered slightly.

“Then you will think it wicked in me to wear it,” said Celia uneasily.

“No, dear, no,” said Dorothea, stroking her sister’s cheek. “Souls have complexions too: what will suit one will not suit another.”

“But you might like to keep it for Mamma’s sake.”

“No, I have other things of Mamma’s—her sandalwood box which I am so fond of—plenty of things. In fact, they are all yours, dear. We need discuss them no longer. There—take away your property.”

Celia felt a little hurt. There was a strong assumption of superiority in this puritanic toleration, hardly less trying to the blond flesh of an unenthusiastic sister than a puritanic persecution.

“But how can I wear ornaments if you, who are the elder sister, will never wear them?”

“Nay, Celia, that is too much to ask, that I should wear trinkets to keep you in countenance. If I were to put on such a necklace as that, I should feel as if I had been pirouetting. The world would go round with me, and I should not know how to walk.”

Celia had unclasped the necklace and drawn it off. “It would be a little tight for your neck; something to lie down and hang would suit you better,” she said with some satisfaction. The complete unfitness of the necklace from all points of view for Dorothea made Celia happier in taking it. She was opening some ring-boxes, which disclosed a fine emerald with diamonds, and just then the sun passing beyond a cloud sent a bright gleam over the table.

“How very beautiful these gems are!” said Dorothea, under a new current of feeling as sudden as the gleam. “It is strange how deeply colours seem to penetrate one, like scent. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as spiritual emblems in the Revelation of St. John. They look like fragments of heaven. I think that emerald is more beautiful than any of them.”

“And there is a bracelet to match it,” said Celia. “We did not notice this at first.”

“They are lovely,” said Dorothea, slipping the ring and bracelet on her finely turned finger and wrist and holding them towards the window on a level with her eyes. All the while her thought was trying to justify her delight in the colours by merging them in her mystic religious joy.

“You *would* like those, Dorothea,” said Celia rather falteringly, beginning to think with wonder that her sister showed some weakness and also that emeralds would suit her own complexion even better than purple amethysts. “You must keep that ring and bracelet—if nothing else. But, see, these agates are very pretty—and quiet.”

“Yes! I will keep these—this ring and bracelet,” said Dorothea. Then, letting her hand fall on the table, she said in another tone, “Yet what miserable men find such things, and work at them, and sell them!” She paused again, and Celia thought that her sister was going to renounce the ornaments, as in consistency she ought to do.

“Yes, dear, I will keep these,” said Dorothea decidedly. “But take all the rest away, and the casket.”

She took up her pencil without removing the jewels and still looking at them. She thought of often having them by her to feed her eye at these little fountains of pure colour.

“Shall you wear them in company?” said Celia, who was watching her with real curiosity as to what she would do.

Dorothea glanced quickly at her sister. Across all her imaginative adornment of those whom she loved there darted now and then a keen discernment which was not without a scorching quality. If Miss Brooke ever attained perfect meekness, it would not be for lack of inward fire.

“Perhaps,” she said rather haughtily. “I cannot tell to what level I may sink.”

Celia blushed and was unhappy; she saw that she had offended her sister and dared not say even anything pretty about the gift of the ornaments which she put back into the box and carried away. Dorothea too was unhappy as she went on with her plan-drawing, questioning the purity of her own feeling and speech in the scene which had ended with that little explosion.

Celia’s consciousness told her that she had not been at all in the wrong: it was quite natural and justifiable that she should have asked that question, and she repeated to herself that Dorothea was inconsistent: either she should have taken her full share of the jewels, or after what she had said, she should have renounced them altogether.

“I am sure—at least, I trust,” thought Celia, “that the wearing of a necklace will not interfere with my prayers. And I do not see that I should be bound by Dorothea’s opinions now we are going into society, though of course she herself ought to be bound by them. But Dorothea is not always consistent.”

Thus Celia, mutely bending over her tapestry until she heard her sister calling her.

“Here, Kitty, come and look at my plan; I shall think I am a great architect if I have not got incompatible stairs and fireplaces.”

As Celia bent over the paper, Dorothea put her cheek against her sister’s arm caressingly. Celia understood the action. Dorothea saw that she had been in the wrong, and Celia pardoned her. Since they could remember, there had been a mixture of criticism and awe in the attitude of Celia’s mind towards her elder sister. The younger had always worn a yoke; but is there any yoked creature without its private opinions?

CHAPTER 2

"Dime; no ves aquel caballero que hácia nosotros viene sobre un caballo rucio rodado que trae puesto en la cabeza un yelmo de oro?" "Lo que veo y columbro," respondió Sancho, "no es sino un hombre sobre un asno pardo como el mío, que trae sobre la cabeza una cosa que relumbra." "Pues ése es el yelmo de Mambrino," dijo Don Quijote.

—CERVANTES

"Seest thou not yon cavalier who cometh toward us on a dapple-grey steed, and weareth a golden helmet?" "What I see," answered Sancho, "is nothing but a man on a grey ass like my own, who carries something shiny on his head." "Just so," answered Don Quixote: "and that resplendent object is the helmet of Mambrino."

Sir Humphry Davy?" said Mr. Brooke, over the soup, in his easy smiling way, taking up Sir James Chettam's remark that he was studying Davy's *Agricultural Chemistry*. "Well, now, Sir Humphry Davy: I dined with him years ago at Cartwright's, and Wordsworth was there too—the poet Wordsworth, you know. Now there was something singular. I was at Cambridge when Wordsworth was there, and I never met him—and I dined with him twenty years afterwards at Cartwright's. There's an oddity in things, now. But Davy was there; he was a poet too. Or, as I may say, Wordsworth was poet one, and Davy was poet two. That was true in every sense, you know."

Dorothea felt a little more uneasy than usual. In the beginning of dinner, the party being small and the room still, these motes from the mass of a magistrate's mind fell too noticeably. She wondered how a man like Mr. Casaubon would support such triviality. His manners, she thought, were very dignified; the set of his iron-grey hair and his deep eyesockets made him resemble the portrait of Locke. He had the spare form and the pale complexion which became a student, as different as possible from the blooming Englishman of the red-whiskered type represented by Sir James Chettam.

"I am reading the *Agricultural Chemistry*," said this excellent baronet, "because I am going to take one of the farms into my own hands and see if something cannot be done in setting a good pattern of farming among my tenants. Do you approve of that, Miss Brooke?"

"A great mistake, Chettam," interposed Mr. Brooke, "going into electrifying your land and that kind of thing and making a parlour of your cow-house. It won't do. I went into science a great deal myself at one time; but I saw it would not do. It leads to everything; you can let nothing alone. No, no—see that your tenants don't sell their straw, and that kind of thing, and give them draining-tiles, you know. But your fancy farming will not do—the most expensive sort of whistle you can buy; you may as well keep a pack of hounds."

"Surely," said Dorothea, "it is better to spend money in finding out how men can make the most of the land which supports them all than in keeping dogs and horses only to gallop over it. It is not a sin to make yourself poor in performing experiments for the good of all."

She spoke with more energy than is expected of so young a lady, but Sir James had appealed to her. He was accustomed to do so, and she had often thought that she could urge him to many good actions when he was her brother-in-law.

Mr. Casaubon turned his eyes very markedly on Dorothea while she was speaking, and seemed to observe her newly.

"Young ladies don't understand political economy, you know," said Mr. Brooke, smiling towards Mr. Casaubon. "I remember when we were all reading Adam Smith. *There* is a book, now. I took in all the new ideas at one time—human perfectibility, now. But some say history moves in circles, and that may be very well argued; I have argued it myself. The fact is, human reason may carry you a little too far—over the hedge, in fact. It carried me a good way at one time, but I saw it would not do. I pulled up; I pulled up in time. But not too hard. I have always been in favour of a little theory; we must have thought, else we shall be landed back in the Dark Ages. But talking of books, there is Southey's *Peninsular War*. I am reading that of a morning. You know Southey?"

"No," said Mr. Casaubon, not keeping pace with Mr. Brooke's impetuous reason, and thinking of the book only. "I have little leisure for such literature just now. I have been using up my eyesight on old characters lately; the fact is, I want a reader for my evenings, but I am fastidious in voices, and I cannot endure listening to an imperfect reader. It is a misfortune, in some senses: I feed too much on the inward sources; I live too much with the dead. My mind is something like the ghost of an ancient, wandering about the world and trying mentally to construct it as it used to be in spite of ruin and confusing changes. But I find it necessary to use the utmost caution about my eyesight."

This was the first time that Mr. Casaubon had spoken at any length. He delivered himself with precision as if he had been called upon to make a public statement; and the balanced sing-song neatness of his speech, occasionally corresponded to by a movement of his head, was the more conspicuous from its contrast with good Mr. Brooke's scrappy slovenliness. Dorothea said to herself that Mr. Casaubon was the most interesting man she had ever seen, not excepting even Monsieur Liret, the Vaudois clergyman who had given conferences on the history of the Waldenses. To reconstruct a past world, doubtless with a view to the highest purposes of truth—what a work to be in any way present at, to assist in, though only as a lamp-holder! This elevating thought lifted her above her annoyance at being twitted with her ignorance of political economy, that never-explained science which was thrust as an extinguisher over all her lights.

"But you are fond of riding, Miss Brooke," Sir James presently took an opportunity of saying. "I should have thought you would enter a little into the pleasure of hunting. I wish you would let me send over a chestnut horse for you to try. It has been trained for a lady. I saw you on Saturday cantering over the hill on a nag not worthy of you. My groom shall bring

Corydon for you every day if you will only mention the time."

"Thank you; you are very good. I mean to give up riding. I shall not ride any more," said Dorothea, urged to this brusque resolution by a little annoyance that Sir James would be soliciting her attention when she wanted to give it all to Mr. Casaubon.

"No, that is too hard," said Sir James in a tone of reproach that showed strong interest. "Your sister is given to self-mortification, is she not?" he continued, turning to Celia, who sat at his right hand.

"I think she is," said Celia, feeling afraid lest she should say something that would not please her sister and blushing as prettily as possible above her necklace. "She likes giving up."

"If that were true, Celia, my giving up would be self-indulgence, not self-mortification. But there may be good reasons for choosing not to do what is very agreeable," said Dorothea.

Mr. Brooke was speaking at the same time, but it was evident that Mr. Casaubon was observing Dorothea, and she was aware of it.

"Exactly," said Sir James. "You give up from some high, generous motive."

"No indeed, not exactly. I did not say that of myself," answered Dorothea, reddening. Unlike Celia, she rarely blushed, and only from high delight or anger. At this moment she felt angry with the perverse Sir James. Why did he not pay attention to Celia, and leave her to listen to Mr. Casaubon? If that learned man would only talk, instead of allowing himself to be talked to by Mr. Brooke, who was just then informing him that the Reformation either meant something or it did not; that he himself was a Protestant to the core but that Catholicism was a fact; and as to refusing an acre of your ground for a Romanist chapel, all men needed the bridle of religion, which, properly speaking, was the dread of a hereafter.

"I made a great study of theology at one time," said Mr. Brooke as if to explain the insight just manifested. "I know something of all schools. I knew Wilberforce in his best days. Do you know Wilberforce?"

Mr. Casaubon said, "No."

"Well, Wilberforce was perhaps not enough of a thinker; but if I went into Parliament, as I have been asked to do, I should sit on the independent bench, as Wilberforce did, and work at philanthropy."

Mr. Casaubon bowed and observed that it was a wide field.

"Yes," said Mr. Brooke with an easy smile, "but I have documents. I began a long while ago to collect documents. They want arranging, but when a question has struck me, I have written to somebody and got an answer. I have documents at my back. But now, how do you arrange your documents?"

"In pigeonholes partly," said Mr. Casaubon with rather a startled air of effort.

"Ah, pigeonholes will not do. I have tried pigeonholes, but everything gets mixed in pigeonholes: I never know whether a paper is in *A* or *Z*."

"I wish you would let me sort your papers for you, Uncle," said Dorothea. "I would letter them all and then make a list of subjects under each letter."

Mr. Casaubon gravely smiled approval and said to Mr. Brooke, "You have an excellent secretary at hand, you perceive."

"No, no," said Mr. Brooke, shaking his head; "I cannot let young ladies meddle with my documents. Young ladies are too flighty."

Dorothea felt hurt. Mr. Casaubon would think that her uncle had some special reason for delivering this opinion, whereas the remark lay in his mind as lightly as the broken wing of an insect among all the other fragments there, and a chance current had sent it alighting on *her*.

When the two girls were in the drawing-room alone, Celia said, "How very ugly Mr. Casaubon is!"

"Celia! He is one of the most distinguished-looking men I ever saw. He is remarkably like the portrait of Locke. He has the same deep eyesockets."

"Had Locke those two white moles with hairs on them?"

"Oh, I dare say! When people of a certain sort looked at him," said Dorothea, walking away a little.

"Mr. Casaubon is so sallow."

"All the better. I suppose you admire a man with the complexion of a *cochon de lait*."

"Dodo!" exclaimed Celia, looking after her in surprise. "I never heard you make such a comparison before."

"Why should I make it before the occasion came? It is a good comparison: the match is perfect."

Miss Brooke was clearly forgetting herself, and Celia thought so.

"I wonder you show temper, Dorothea."

"It is so painful in you, Celia, that you will look at human beings as if they were merely animals with a toilette and never see the great soul in a man's face."

"Has Mr. Casaubon a great soul?" Celia was not without a touch of naïve malice.

"Yes, I believe he has," said Dorothea with the full voice of decision. "Everything I see in him corresponds to his pamphlet on Biblical cosmology."

"He talks very little," said Celia.

"There is no one for him to talk to."

Celia thought privately, "Dorothea quite despises Sir James Chettam; I believe she would not accept him." Celia felt that this was a pity. She had never been deceived as to the object of the baronet's interest. Sometimes, indeed, she had reflected that Dodo would perhaps not make a husband happy who had not her way of looking at things, and stifled in the depths of her heart was the feeling that her sister was too religious for family comfort. Notions and scruples were like spilt needles, making one afraid of treading, or sitting down, or even eating.

When Miss Brooke was at the tea-table, Sir James came to sit down by her, not having felt her mode of answering him at all offensive. Why should he? He thought it probable that Miss Brooke liked him, and manners must be very marked indeed before they cease to be interpreted by preconceptions either confident or distrustful. She was thoroughly charming to him, but of course he theorized a little about his attachment. He was made of excellent human dough and had the rare merit of knowing that his talents, even if let loose, would not set the smallest stream in the county on fire: hence he liked the

prospect of a wife to whom he could say, “What shall we do?” about this or that; who could help her husband out with reasons, and would also have the property qualification for doing so. As to the excessive religiousness alleged against Miss Brooke, he had a very indefinite notion of what it consisted in and thought that it would die out with marriage. In short, he felt himself to be in love in the right place and was ready to endure a great deal of predominance, which, after all, a man could always put down when he liked. Sir James had no idea that he should ever like to put down the predominance of this handsome girl, in whose cleverness he delighted. Why not? A man’s mind—what there is of it—has always the advantage of being masculine, as the smallest birch-tree is of a higher kind than the most soaring palm, and even his ignorance is of a sounder quality. Sir James might not have originated this estimate; but a kind of Providence furnishes the limpest personality with a little gum or starch in the form of tradition.

“Let me hope that you will rescind that resolution about the horse, Miss Brooke,” said the persevering admirer. “I assure you, riding is the most healthy of exercises.”

“I am aware of it,” said Dorothea coldly. “I think it would do Celia good—if she would take to it.”

“But you are such a perfect horsewoman.”

“Excuse me; I have had very little practice, and I should be easily thrown.”

“Then that is a reason for more practice. Every lady ought to be a perfect horsewoman, that she may accompany her husband.”

“You see how widely we differ, Sir James. I have made up my mind that I ought not to be a perfect horsewoman, and so I should never correspond to your pattern of a lady.” Dorothea looked straight before her and spoke with cold *brusquerie*, very much with the air of a handsome boy, in amusing contrast with the solicitous amiability of her admirer.

“I should like to know your reasons for this cruel resolution. It is not possible that you should think horsemanship wrong.”

“It is quite possible that I should think it wrong for me.”

“Oh, why?” said Sir James in a tender tone of remonstrance.

Mr. Casaubon had come up to the table, tea-cup in hand, and was listening.

“We must not inquire too curiously into motives,” he interposed in his measured way. “Miss Brooke knows that they are apt to become feeble in the utterance: the aroma is mixed with the grosser air. We must keep the germinating grain away from the light.”

Dorothea coloured with pleasure and looked up gratefully to the speaker. Here was a man who could understand the higher inward life and with whom there could be some spiritual communion; nay, who could illuminate principle with the widest knowledge: a man whose learning almost amounted to a proof of whatever he believed!

Dorothea’s inferences may seem large; but really life could never have gone on at any period but for this liberal allowance of conclusions, which has facilitated marriage under the difficulties of civilization. Has anyone ever pinched into its pilulous smallness the cobweb of pre-matrimonial acquaintanceship?

“Certainly,” said good Sir James. “Miss Brooke shall not be urged to tell reasons she would rather be silent upon. I am sure her reasons would do her honour.”

He was not in the least jealous of the interest with which Dorothea had looked up at Mr. Casaubon: it never occurred to him that a girl to whom he was meditating an offer of marriage could care for a dried bookworm towards fifty, except, indeed, in a religious sort of way, as for a clergyman of some distinction.

However, since Miss Brooke had become engaged in a conversation with Mr. Casaubon about the Vaudois clergy, Sir James betook himself to Celia and talked to her about her sister, spoke of a house in town, and asked whether Miss Brooke disliked London. Away from her sister, Celia talked quite easily, and Sir James said to himself that the second Miss Brooke was certainly very agreeable as well as pretty, though not, as some people pretended, more clever and sensible than the elder sister. He felt that he had chosen the one who was in all respects the superior; and a man naturally likes to look forward to having the best. He would be the very mawworm of bachelors who pretended not to expect it.

CHAPTER 3

Say, goddess, what ensued, when Raphaël,
The affable archangel . . .

Eve

The story heard attentive, and was filled
With admiration, and deep muse, to hear
Of things so high and strange.

—*Paradise Lost*, B. VII

If it had really occurred to Mr. Casaubon to think of Miss Brooke as a suitable wife for him, the reasons that might induce her to accept him were already planted in her mind, and by the evening of the next day the reasons had budded and bloomed. For they had had a long conversation in the morning, while Celia, who did not like the company of Mr. Casaubon's moles and sallowness, had escaped to the vicarage to play with the curate's ill-shod but merry children.

Dorothea by this time had looked deep into the ungauged reservoir of Mr. Casaubon's mind, seeing reflected there in vague labyrinthine extension every quality she herself brought, had opened much of her own experience to him, and had understood from him the scope of his great work, also of attractively labyrinthine extent. For he had been as instructive as Milton's "affable archangel," and with something of the archangelic manner he told her how he had undertaken to show (what indeed had been attempted before, but not with that thoroughness, justice of comparison, and effectiveness of arrangement at which Mr. Casaubon aimed) that all the mythical systems or erratic mythical fragments in the world were corruptions of a tradition originally revealed. Having once mastered the true position and taken a firm footing there, the vast field of mythical constructions became intelligible, nay, luminous, with the reflected light of correspondences. But to gather in this great harvest of truth was no light or speedy work. His notes already made a formidable range of volumes, but the crowning task would be to condense these voluminous still-accumulating results and bring them, like the earlier vintage of Hippocratic books, to fit a little shelf. In explaining this to Dorothea, Mr. Casaubon expressed himself nearly as he would have done to a fellow-student, for he had not two styles of talking at command: it is true that when he used a Greek or Latin phrase he always gave the English with scrupulous care, but he would probably have done this in any case. A learned provincial clergyman is accustomed to think of his acquaintances as of "lords, knyghtes, and other noble and worthi men, that conne Latyn but lytille."

Dorothea was altogether captivated by the wide embrace of this conception. Here was something beyond the shallows of ladies'-school literature: here was a living Bossuet, whose work would reconcile complete knowledge with devoted piety; here was a modern Augustine who united the glories of doctor and saint.

The sanctity seemed no less clearly marked than the learning, for when Dorothea was impelled to open her mind on certain themes which she could speak of to no one whom she had before seen at Tipton, especially on the secondary importance of ecclesiastical forms and articles of belief compared with that spiritual religion, that submergence of self in communion with Divine perfection which seemed to her to be expressed in the best Christian books of widely distant ages, she found in Mr. Casaubon a listener who understood her at once, who could assure her of his own agreement with that view when duly tempered with wise conformity, and could mention historical examples before unknown to her.

"He thinks with me," said Dorothea to herself, "or rather, he thinks a whole world of which my thought is but a poor twopenny mirror. And his feelings, too, his whole experience—what a lake compared with my little pool!"

Miss Brooke argued from words and dispositions not less unhesitatingly than other young ladies of her age. Signs are small, measurable things, but interpretations are illimitable, and in girls of sweet, ardent nature, every sign is apt to conjure up wonder, hope, belief, vast as a sky and coloured by a diffused thimbleful of matter in the shape of knowledge. They are not always too grossly deceived; for Sinbad himself may have fallen by good luck on a true description, and wrong reasoning sometimes lands poor mortals in right conclusions: starting a long way off the true point and proceeding by loops and zigzags, we now and then arrive just where we ought to be. Because Miss Brooke was hasty in her trust, it is not therefore clear that Mr. Casaubon was unworthy of it.

He stayed a little longer than he had intended, on a slight pressure of invitation from Mr. Brooke, who offered no bait except his own documents on machine-breaking and rick-burning. Mr. Casaubon was called into the library to look at these in a heap, while his host picked up first one and then the other to read aloud from in a skipping and uncertain way, passing from one unfinished passage to another with a "Yes, now, but here!" and finally pushing them all aside to open the journal of his youthful Continental travels.

"Look here—here is all about Greece. Rhamnus, the ruins of Rhamnus—you are a great Grecian now. I don't know whether you have given much study to the topography. I spent no end of time in making out these things—Helicon, now. Here, now! 'We started the next morning for Parnassus, the double-peaked Parnassus.' All this volume is about Greece, you know," Mr. Brooke wound up, rubbing his thumb transversely along the edges of the leaves as he held the book forward.

Mr. Casaubon made a dignified though somewhat sad audience, bowed in the right place, and avoided looking at anything documentary as far as possible, without showing disregard or impatience, mindful that this desultoriness was

associated with the institutions of the country and that the man who took him on this severe mental scamper was not only an amiable host, but a landholder and *custos rotulorum*. Was his endurance aided also by the reflection that Mr. Brooke was the uncle of Dorothea?

Certainly he seemed more and more bent on making her talk to him, on drawing her out, as Celia remarked to herself; and in looking at her, his face was often lit up by a smile like pale wintry sunshine. Before he left the next morning, while taking a pleasant walk with Miss Brooke along the gravelled terrace, he had mentioned to her that he felt the disadvantage of loneliness, the need of that cheerful companionship with which the presence of youth can lighten or vary the serious toils of maturity. And he delivered this statement with as much careful precision as if he had been a diplomatic envoy whose words would be attended with results. Indeed, Mr. Casaubon was not used to expect that he should have to repeat or revise his communications of a practical or personal kind. The inclinations which he had deliberately stated on the second of October he would think it enough to refer to by the mention of that date; judging by the standard of his own memory, which was a volume where a *vide supra* could serve instead of repetitions, and not the ordinary long-used blotting-book which only tells of forgotten writing. But in this case Mr. Casaubon's confidence was not likely to be falsified, for Dorothea heard and retained what he said with the eager interest of a fresh young nature to which every variety in experience is an epoch.

It was three o'clock in the beautiful breezy autumn day when Mr. Casaubon drove off to his rectory at Lowick, only five miles from Tipton; and Dorothea, who had on her bonnet and shawl, hurried along the shrubbery and across the park that she might wander through the bordering wood with no other visible companionship than that of Monk, the great St. Bernard dog, who always took care of the young ladies in their walks. There had risen before her the girl's vision of a possible future for herself to which she looked forward with trembling hope, and she wanted to wander on in that visionary future without interruption. She walked briskly in the brisk air, the colour rose in her cheeks, and her straw bonnet (which our contemporaries might look at with conjectural curiosity as at an obsolete form of basket) fell a little backward. She would perhaps be hardly characterized enough if it were omitted that she wore her brown hair flatly braided and coiled behind so as to expose the outline of her head in a daring manner at a time when public feeling required the meagreness of nature to be dissimulated by tall barricades of frizzed curls and bows, never surpassed by any great race except the Feejeean. This was a trait of Miss Brooke's asceticism. But there was nothing of an ascetic's expression in her bright, full eyes as she looked before her, not consciously seeing, but absorbing into the intensity of her mood the solemn glory of the afternoon with its long swathes of light between the far-off rows of limes, whose shadows touched each other.

All people, young or old (that is, all people in those ante-reform times), would have thought her an interesting object if they had referred the glow in her eyes and cheeks to the newly awakened ordinary images of young love: the illusions of Chloe about Strephon have been sufficiently consecrated in poetry, as the pathetic loveliness of all spontaneous trust ought to be. Miss Pippin adoring young Pumpkin and dreaming along endless vistas of unwearying companionship was a little drama which never tired our fathers and mothers, and had been put into all costumes. Let but Pumpkin have a figure which would sustain the disadvantages of the short-waisted swallowtail, and everybody felt it not only natural but necessary to the perfection of womanhood that a sweet girl should be at once convinced of his virtue, his exceptional ability, and above all his perfect sincerity. But perhaps no persons then living—certainly none in the neighbourhood of Tipton—would have had a sympathetic understanding for the dreams of a girl whose notions about marriage took their colour entirely from an exalted enthusiasm about the ends of life, an enthusiasm which was lit chiefly by its own fire and included neither the niceties of the *trousseau*, the pattern of plate, nor even the honours and sweet joys of the blooming matron.

It had now entered Dorothea's mind that Mr. Casaubon might wish to make her his wife, and the idea that he would do so touched her with a sort of reverential gratitude. How good of him—nay, it would be almost as if a winged messenger had suddenly stood beside her path and held out his hand towards her! For a long while she had been oppressed by the indefiniteness which hung in her mind like a thick summer haze over all her desire to make her life greatly effective. What could she do, what ought she to do?—she, hardly more than a budding woman, but yet with an active conscience and a great mental need not to be satisfied by a girlish instruction comparable to the nibblings and judgements of a discursive mouse. With some endowment of stupidity and conceit, she might have thought that a Christian young lady of fortune should find her ideal of life in village charities, patronage of the humbler clergy, the perusal of *Female Scripture Characters*, unfolding the private experience of Sara under the Old Dispensation, and Dorcas under the New, and the care of her soul over her embroidery in her own boudoir, with a background of prospective marriage to a man who, if less strict than herself, as being involved in affairs religiously inexplicable, might be prayed for and seasonably exhorted. From such contentment poor Dorothea was shut out. The intensity of her religious disposition, the coercion it exercised over her life, was but one aspect of a nature altogether ardent, theoretic, and intellectually consequent; and with such a nature, struggling in the bands of a narrow teaching, hemmed in by a social life which seemed nothing but a labyrinth of petty courses, a walled-in maze of small paths that led no whither, the outcome was sure to strike others as at once exaggeration and inconsistency. The thing which seemed to her best, she wanted to justify by the completest knowledge, and not to live in a pretended admission of rules which were never acted on. Into this soul hunger as yet all her youthful passion was poured; the union which attracted her was one that would deliver her from her girlish subjection to her own ignorance and give her the freedom of voluntary submission to a guide who would take her along the grandest path.

"I should learn everything then," she said to herself, still walking quickly along the bridle road through the wood. "It would be my duty to study that I might help him the better in his great works. There would be nothing trivial about our lives. Everyday things with us would mean the greatest things. It would be like marrying Pascal. I should learn to see the truth by the same light as great men have seen it by. And then I should know what to do when I got older: I should see how it was possible to lead a grand life here—now—in England. I don't feel sure about doing good in any way now; everything seems like going on a mission to a people whose language I don't know—unless it were building good cottages—there can be no doubt about that. Oh, I hope I should be able to get the people well housed in Lowick! I will draw plenty

of plans while I have time."

Dorothea checked herself suddenly with self-rebuke for the presumptuous way in which she was reckoning on uncertain events, but she was spared any inward effort to change the direction of her thoughts by the appearance of a cantering horseman round a turning of the road. The well-groomed chestnut horse and two beautiful setters could leave no doubt that the rider was Sir James Chettam. He discerned Dorothea, jumped off his horse at once, and having delivered it to his groom, advanced towards her with something white on his arm, at which the two setters were barking in an excited manner.

"How delightful to meet you, Miss Brooke," he said, raising his hat and showing his sleekly waving blond hair. "It has hastened the pleasure I was looking forward to."

Miss Brooke was annoyed at the interruption. This amiable baronet, really a suitable husband for Celia, exaggerated the necessity of making himself agreeable to the elder sister. Even a prospective brother-in-law may be an oppression if he will always be presupposing too good an understanding with you and agreeing with you even when you contradict him. The thought that he had made the mistake of paying his addresses to herself could not take shape: all her mental activity was used up in persuasions of another kind. But he was positively obtrusive at this moment, and his dimpled hands were quite disagreeable. Her roused temper made her colour deeply as she returned his greeting with some haughtiness.

Sir James interpreted the heightened colour in the way most gratifying to himself and thought he never saw Miss Brooke looking so handsome.

"I have brought a little petitioner," he said, "or rather, I have brought him to see if he will be approved before his petition is offered." He showed the white object under his arm, which was a tiny Maltese puppy, one of nature's most naïve toys.

"It is painful to me to see these creatures that are bred merely as pets," said Dorothea, whose opinion was forming itself that very moment (as opinions will) under the heat of irritation.

"Oh, why?" said Sir James as they walked forward.

"I believe all the petting that is given them does not make them happy. They are too helpless; their lives are too frail. A weasel or a mouse that gets its own living is more interesting. I like to think that the animals about us have souls something like our own and either carry on their own little affairs or can be companions to us, like Monk here. Those creatures are parasitic."

"I am so glad I know that you do not like them," said good Sir James. "I should never keep them for myself, but ladies usually are fond of these Maltese dogs. Here, John, take this dog, will you?"

The objectionable puppy, whose nose and eyes were equally black and expressive, was thus got rid of since Miss Brooke decided that it had better not have been born. But she felt it necessary to explain.

"You must not judge of Celia's feeling from mine. I think she likes these small pets. She had a tiny terrier once, which she was very fond of. It made me unhappy because I was afraid of treading on it. I am rather short-sighted."

"You have your own opinion about everything, Miss Brooke, and it is always a good opinion."

What answer was possible to such stupid complimenting?

"Do you know, I envy you that," Sir James said as they continued walking at the rather brisk pace set by Dorothea.

"I don't quite understand what you mean."

"Your power of forming an opinion. I can form an opinion of persons. I know when I like people. But about other matters, do you know, I have often a difficulty in deciding. One hears very sensible things said on opposite sides."

"Or that seem sensible. Perhaps we don't always discriminate between sense and nonsense."

Dorothea felt that she was rather rude.

"Exactly," said Sir James. "But you seem to have the power of discrimination."

"On the contrary, I am often unable to decide. But that is from ignorance. The right conclusion is there all the same, though I am unable to see it."

"I think there are few who would see it more readily. Do you know, Lovegood was telling me yesterday that you had the best notion in the world of a plan for cottages—quite wonderful for a young lady, he thought. You had a real *genus*, to use his expression. He said you wanted Mr. Brooke to build a new set of cottages, but he seemed to think it hardly probable that your uncle would consent. Do you know, that is one of the things I wish to do—I mean, on my own estate. I should be so glad to carry out that plan of yours if you would let me see it. Of course, it is sinking money: that is why people object to it. Labourers can never pay rent to make it answer. But, after all, it is worth doing."

"Worth doing! Yes, indeed," said Dorothea energetically, forgetting her previous small vexations. "I think we deserve to be beaten out of our beautiful houses with a scourge of small cords—all of us who let tenants live in such sties as we see round us. Life in cottages might be happier than ours if they were real houses fit for human beings from whom we expect duties and affections."

"Will you show me your plan?"

"Yes, certainly. I dare say it is very faulty. But I have been examining all the plans for cottages in Lundon's book and picked out what seem the best things. Oh, what a happiness it would be to set the pattern about here! I think, instead of Lazarus at the gate, we should put the pig-sty cottages outside the park-gate."

Dorothea was in the best temper now. Sir James, as brother-in-law, building model cottages on his estate, and then, perhaps, others being built at Lowick, and more and more elsewhere in imitation—it would be as if the spirit of Oberlin had passed over the parishes to make the life of poverty beautiful!

Sir James saw all the plans and took one away to consult upon with Lovegood. He also took away a complacent sense that he was making great progress in Miss Brooke's good opinion. The Maltese puppy was not offered to Celia, an omission which Dorothea afterwards thought of with surprise, but she blamed herself for it. She had been engrossing Sir James. After all, it was a relief that there was no puppy to tread upon.

Celia was present while the plans were being examined, and observed Sir James's illusion. "He thinks that Dodo cares about him, and she only cares about her plans. Yet I am not certain that she would refuse him if she thought he would let

her manage everything and carry out all her notions. And how very uncomfortable Sir James would be! I cannot bear notions."

It was Celia's private luxury to indulge in this dislike. She dared not confess it to her sister in any direct statement, for that would be laying herself open to a demonstration that she was somehow or other at war with all goodness. But on safe opportunities, she had an indirect mode of making her negative wisdom tell upon Dorothea and calling her down from her rhapsodic mood by reminding her that people were staring, not listening. Celia was not impulsive: what she had to say could wait and came from her always with the same quiet, staccato evenness. When people talked with energy and emphasis she watched their faces and features merely. She never could understand how well-bred persons consented to sing and open their mouths in the ridiculous manner requisite for that vocal exercise.

It was not many days before Mr. Casaubon paid a morning visit, on which he was invited again for the following week to dine and stay the night. Thus Dorothea had three more conversations with him, and was convinced that her first impressions had been just. He was all she had at first imagined him to be: almost everything he had said seemed like a specimen from a mine or the inscription on the door of a museum which might open on the treasures of past ages; and this trust in his mental wealth was all the deeper and more effective on her inclination because it was now obvious that his visits were made for her sake. This accomplished man condescended to think of a young girl and take the pains to talk to her, not with absurd compliment, but with an appeal to her understanding, and sometimes with instructive correction. What delightful companionship! Mr. Casaubon seemed even unconscious that trivialities existed and never handed round that small-talk of heavy men which is as acceptable as stale bride-cake brought forth with an odour of cupboard. He talked of what he was interested in, or else he was silent and bowed with sad civility. To Dorothea this was adorable genuineness and religious abstinence from that artificiality which uses up the soul in the efforts of pretence. For she looked as reverently at Mr. Casaubon's religious elevation above herself as she did at his intellect and learning. He assented to her expressions of devout feeling, and usually with an appropriate quotation; he allowed himself to say that he had gone through some spiritual conflicts in his youth; in short, Dorothea saw that here she might reckon on understanding, sympathy, and guidance. On one—only one—of her favourite themes she was disappointed. Mr. Casaubon apparently did not care about building cottages and diverted the talk to the extremely narrow accommodation which was to be had in the dwellings of the ancient Egyptians, as if to check a too high standard. After he was gone, Dorothea dwelt with some agitation on this indifference of his, and her mind was much exercised with arguments drawn from the varying conditions of climate which modify human needs and from the admitted wickedness of pagan despots. Should she not urge these arguments on Mr. Casaubon when he came again? But further reflection told her that she was presumptuous in demanding his attention to such a subject; he would not disapprove of her occupying herself with it in leisure moments, as other women expected to occupy themselves with their dress and embroidery; would not forbid it when— Dorothea felt rather ashamed as she detected herself in these speculations. But her uncle had been invited to go to Lowick to stay a couple of days: was it reasonable to suppose that Mr. Casaubon delighted in Mr. Brooke's society for its own sake, either with or without documents?

Meanwhile that little disappointment made her delight the more in Sir James Chettam's readiness to set on foot the desired improvements. He came much oftener than Mr. Casaubon, and Dorothea ceased to find him disagreeable since he showed himself so entirely in earnest, for he had already entered with much practical ability into Lovegood's estimates and was charmingly docile. She proposed to build a couple of cottages and transfer two families from their old cabins, which could then be pulled down so that new ones could be built on the old sites. Sir James said, "Exactly," and she bore the word remarkably well.

Certainly these men who had so few spontaneous ideas might be very useful members of society under good feminine direction if they were fortunate in choosing their sisters-in-law! It is difficult to say whether there was or was not a little wilfulness in her continuing blind to the possibility that another sort of choice was in question in relation to her. But her life was just now full of hope and action; she was not only thinking of her plans, but getting down learned books from the library and reading many things hastily (that she might be a little less ignorant in talking to Mr. Casaubon), all the while being visited with conscientious questionings whether she were not exalting these poor doings above measure and contemplating them with that self-satisfaction which was the last doom of ignorance and folly.

CHAPTER 4

1ST GENT. Our deeds are fetters that we forge ourselves.
2ND GENT. Ay, truly: but I think it is the world
That brings the iron.

"Sir James seems determined to do everything you wish," said Celia as they were driving home from an inspection of the new building-site.

"He is a good creature and more sensible than any one would imagine," said Dorothea inconsiderately.

"You mean that he appears silly."

"No, no," said Dorothea, recollecting herself and laying her hand on her sister's a moment, "but he does not talk equally well on all subjects."

"I should think none but disagreeable people do," said Celia in her usual purring way. "They must be very dreadful to live with. Only think! At breakfast, and always."

Dorothea laughed. "Oh, Kitty, you are a wonderful creature!" She pinched Celia's chin, being in the mood now to think her very winning and lovely—fit hereafter to be an eternal cherub, and if it were not doctrinally wrong to say so, hardly more in need of salvation than a squirrel. "Of course people need not be always talking well. Only one tells the quality of their minds when they try to talk well."

"You mean that Sir James tries and fails."

"I was speaking generally. Why do you catechise me about Sir James? It is not the object of his life to please me."

"Now, Dodo, can you really believe that?"

"Certainly. He thinks of me as a future sister, that is all." Dorothea had never hinted this before, waiting, from a certain shyness on such subjects which was mutual between the sisters, until it should be introduced by some decisive event.

Celia blushed, but said at once, "Pray do not make that mistake any longer, Dodo. When Tantripp was brushing my hair the other day, she said that Sir James's man knew from Mrs. Cadwallader's maid that Sir James was to marry the eldest Miss Brooke."

"How can you let Tantripp talk such gossip to you, Celia?" said Dorothea indignantly, not the less angry because details asleep in her memory were now awakened to confirm the unwelcome revelation. "You must have asked her questions. It is degrading."

"I see no harm at all in Tantripp's talking to me. It is better to hear what people say. You see what mistakes you make by taking up notions. I am quite sure that Sir James means to make you an offer; and he believes that you will accept him, especially since you have been so pleased with him about the plans. And Uncle too—I know he expects it. Everyone can see that Sir James is very much in love with you."

The revulsion was so strong and painful in Dorothea's mind that the tears welled up and flowed abundantly. All her dear plans were embittered, and she thought with disgust of Sir James's conceiving that she recognized him as her lover. There was vexation too on account of Celia.

"How could he expect it?" she burst forth in her most impetuous manner. "I have never agreed with him about anything but the cottages; I was barely polite to him before."

"But you have been so pleased with him since then; he has begun to feel quite sure that you are fond of him."

"Fond of him, Celia! How can you choose such odious expressions?" said Dorothea passionately.

"Dear me, Dorothea, I suppose it would be right for you to be fond of a man whom you accepted for a husband."

"It is offensive to me to say that Sir James could think I was fond of him. Besides, it is not the right word for the feeling I must have towards the man I would accept as a husband."

"Well, I am sorry for Sir James. I thought it right to tell you because you went on as you always do, never looking just where you are and treading in the wrong place. You always see what nobody else sees; it is impossible to satisfy you; yet you never see what is quite plain. That's your way, Dodo." Something certainly gave Celia unusual courage, and she was not sparing the sister of whom she was occasionally in awe. Who can tell what just criticisms Murr the cat may be passing on us beings of wider speculation?

"It is very painful," said Dorothea, feeling scourged. "I can have no more to do with the cottages. I must be uncivil to him. I must tell him I will have nothing to do with them. It is very painful." Her eyes filled again with tears.

"Wait a little. Think about it. You know he is going away for a day or two to see his sister. There will be nobody besides Lovegood." Celia could not help relenting. "Poor Dodo," she went on, in an amiable staccato. "It is very hard; it is your favourite *fad* to draw plans."

"*Fad* to draw plans! Do you think I only care about my fellow-creatures' houses in that childish way? I may well make mistakes. How can one ever do anything nobly Christian, living among people with such petty thoughts?"

No more was said: Dorothea was too much jarred to recover her temper and behave so as to show that she admitted any error in herself. She was disposed rather to accuse the intolerable narrowness and the purblind conscience of the society around her; and Celia was no longer the eternal cherub, but a thorn in her spirit, a pink-and-white nullifidian, worse than

any discouraging presence in the *Pilgrim's Progress*. The *fad* of drawing plans! What was life worth—what great faith was possible when the whole effect of one's actions could be withered up into such parched rubbish as that? When she got out of the carriage, her cheeks were pale and her eyelids red. She was an image of sorrow, and her uncle, who met her in the hall, would have been alarmed if Celia had not been close to her looking so pretty and composed that he at once concluded Dorothea's tears to have their origin in her excessive religiousness. He had returned during their absence from a journey to the county town about a petition for the pardon of some criminal.

"Well, my dears," he said, kindly, as they went up to kiss him, "I hope nothing disagreeable has happened while I have been away."

"No, Uncle," said Celia, "we have been to Freshitt to look at the cottages. We thought you would have been at home to lunch."

"I came by Lowick to lunch—you didn't know I came by Lowick. And I have brought a couple of pamphlets for you, Dorothea—in the library, you know; they lie on the table in the library."

It seemed as if an electric stream went through Dorothea, thrilling her from despair into expectation. They were pamphlets about the early Church. The oppression of Celia, Tantripp, and Sir James was shaken off, and she walked straight to the library. Celia went upstairs. Mr. Brooke was detained by a message, but when he re-entered the library, he found Dorothea seated and already deep in one of the pamphlets which had some marginal manuscript of Mr. Casaubon's—taking it in as eagerly as she might have taken in the scent of a fresh bouquet after a dry, hot, dreary walk.

She was getting away from Tipton and Freshitt and her own sad liability to tread in the wrong places on her way to the New Jerusalem.

Mr. Brooke sat down in his arm-chair, stretched his legs towards the wood-fire, which had fallen into a wondrous mass of glowing dice between the dogs, and rubbed his hands gently, looking very mildly towards Dorothea, but with a neutral, leisurely air as if he had nothing particular to say. Dorothea closed her pamphlet as soon as she was aware of her uncle's presence and rose as if to go. Usually she would have been interested about her uncle's merciful errand on behalf of the criminal, but her late agitation had made her absent-minded.

"I came back by Lowick, you know," said Mr. Brooke, not as if with any intention to arrest her departure, but apparently from his usual tendency to say what he had said before. This fundamental principle of human speech was markedly exhibited in Mr. Brooke. "I lunched there and saw Casaubon's library, and that kind of thing. There's a sharp air, driving. Won't you sit down, my dear? You look cold."

Dorothea felt quite inclined to accept the invitation. Sometimes when her uncle's easy way of taking things did not happen to be exasperating, it was rather soothing. She threw off her mantle and bonnet and sat down opposite to him, enjoying the glow, but lifting up her beautiful hands for a screen. They were not thin hands or small hands, but powerful, feminine, maternal hands. She seemed to be holding them up in propitiation for her passionate desire to know and to think, which in the unfriendly mediums of Tipton and Freshitt had issued in crying and red eyelids.

She bethought herself now of the condemned criminal. "What news have you brought about the sheep-stealer, Uncle?"

"What, poor Bunch? Well, it seems we can't get him off; he is to be hanged."

Dorothea's brow took an expression of reprobation and pity.

"Hanged, you know," said Mr. Brooke, with a quiet nod. "Poor Romilly! he would have helped us. I knew Romilly. Casaubon didn't know Romilly. He is a little buried in books, you know, Casaubon is."

"When a man has great studies and is writing a great work, he must of course give up seeing much of the world. How can he go about making acquaintances?"

"That's true. But a man mopes, you know. I have always been a bachelor too, but I have that sort of disposition that I never moped; it was my way to go about everywhere and take in everything. I never moped; but I can see that Casaubon does, you know. He wants a companion—a companion, you know."

"It would be a great honour to anyone to be his companion," said Dorothea energetically.

"You like him, eh?" said Mr. Brooke without showing any surprise or other emotion. "Well, now, I've known Casaubon ten years, ever since he came to Lowick. But I never got anything out of him—any ideas, you know. However, he is a tiptop man and may be a bishop—that kind of thing, you know, if Peel stays in. And he has a very high opinion of you, my dear."

Dorothea could not speak.

"The fact is, he has a very high opinion indeed of you. And he speaks uncommonly well, does Casaubon. He has deferred to me, you not being of age. In short, I have promised to speak to you, though I told him I thought there was not much chance. I was bound to tell him that. I said, 'My niece is very young,' and that kind of thing. But I didn't think it necessary to go into everything. However, the long and the short of it is that he has asked my permission to make you an offer of marriage—of marriage, you know," said Mr. Brooke with his explanatory nod. "I thought it better to tell you, my dear."

No one could have detected any anxiety in Mr. Brooke's manner, but he did really wish to know something of his niece's mind, that if there were any need for advice he might give it in time. What feeling he, as a magistrate who had taken in so many ideas, could make room for was unmixedly kind. Since Dorothea did not speak immediately, he repeated, "I thought it better to tell you, my dear."

"Thank you, Uncle," said Dorothea in a clear, unwavering tone. "I am very grateful to Mr. Casaubon. If he makes me an offer, I shall accept him. I admire and honour him more than any man I ever saw."

Mr. Brooke paused a little and then said in a lingering, low tone, "Ah? Well! He is a good match in some respects. But now, Chettam is a good match. And our land lies together. I shall never interfere against your wishes, my dear. People should have their own way in marriage, and that sort of thing—up to a certain point, you know. I have always said that, up to a certain point. I wish you to marry well, and I have good reason to believe that Chettam wishes to marry you. I mention it, you know."

"It is impossible that I should ever marry Sir James Chettam," said Dorothea. "If he thinks of marrying me, he has made a great mistake."

"That is it, you see. One never knows. I should have thought Chettam was just the sort of man a woman would like,

now."

"Pray do not mention him in that light again, Uncle," said Dorothea, feeling some of her late irritation revive.

Mr. Brooke wondered, and felt that women were an inexhaustible subject of study since even he at his age was not in a perfect state of scientific prediction about them. Here was a fellow like Chettam with no chance at all.

"Well, but Casaubon, now. There is no hurry—I mean for you. It's true, every year will tell upon him. He is over five-and-forty, you know. I should say a good seven-and-twenty years older than you. To be sure, if you like learning and standing, and that sort of thing, we can't have everything. And his income is good—he has a handsome property independent of the Church—his income is good. Still, he is not young, and I must not conceal from you, my dear, that I think his health is not over-strong. I know nothing else against him."

"I should not wish to have a husband very near my own age," said Dorothea with grave decision. "I should wish to have a husband who was above me in judgement and in all knowledge."

Mr. Brooke repeated his subdued "Ah? I thought you had more of your own opinion than most girls. I thought you liked your own opinion—liked it, you know."

"I cannot imagine myself living without some opinions, but I should wish to have good reasons for them, and a wise man could help me to see which opinions had the best foundation, and would help me to live according to them."

"Very true. You couldn't put the thing better—couldn't put it better, beforehand, you know. But there are oddities in things," continued Mr. Brooke, whose conscience was really roused to do the best he could for his niece on this occasion. "Life isn't cast in a mould, not cut out by rule and line, and that sort of thing. I never married myself, and it will be the better for you and yours. The fact is, I never loved anyone well enough to put myself into a noose for them. It *is* a noose, you know. Temper, now. There is temper. And a husband likes to be master."

"I know that I must expect trials, Uncle. Marriage is a state of higher duties. I never thought of it as mere personal ease," said poor Dorothea.

"Well, you are not fond of show, a great establishment, balls, dinners, that kind of thing. I can see that Casaubon's ways might suit you better than Chettam's. And you shall do as you like, my dear. I would not hinder Casaubon; I said so at once; for there is no knowing how anything may turn out. You have not the same tastes as every young lady, and a clergyman and scholar—who may be a bishop—that kind of thing—may suit you better than Chettam. Chettam is a good fellow, a good sound-hearted fellow, you know; but he doesn't go much into ideas. I did when I was his age. But Casaubon's eyes, now. I think he has hurt them a little with too much reading."

"I should be all the happier, Uncle, the more room there was for me to help him," said Dorothea ardently.

"You have quite made up your mind, I see. Well, my dear, the fact is, I have a letter for you in my pocket." Mr. Brooke handed the letter to Dorothea, but as she rose to go away, he added, "There is not too much hurry, my dear. Think about it, you know."

When Dorothea had left him, he reflected that he had certainly spoken strongly; he had put the risks of marriage before her in a striking manner. It was his duty to do so. But as to pretending to be wise for young people, no uncle, however much he had travelled in his youth, absorbed the new ideas, and dined with celebrities now deceased, could pretend to judge what sort of marriage would turn out well for a young girl who preferred Casaubon to Chettam. In short, woman was a problem which, since Mr. Brooke's mind felt blank before it, could be hardly less complicated than the revolutions of an irregular solid.

CHAPTER 5

> Hard students are commonly troubled with gowts, catarrhs, rheums, cachexia, bradypepsia, bad eyes, stone, and collick, crudities, oppilations, vertigo, winds, consumptions, and all such diseases as come by over-much sitting: they are most part lean, dry, ill-coloured . . . and all through immoderate pains and extraordinary studies. If you will not believe the truth of this, look upon great Tostatus and Thomas Aquinas' works; and tell me whether those men took pains.
>
> —BURTON'S *Anatomy of Melancholy,* P. I. S. 2

This was Mr. Casaubon's letter.

My dear Miss Brooke, I have your guardian's permission to address you on a subject than which I have none more at heart. I am not, I trust, mistaken in the recognition of some deeper correspondence than that of date in the fact that a consciousness of need in my own life had arisen contemporaneously with the possibility of my becoming acquainted with you. For in the first hour of meeting you I had an impression of your eminent and perhaps exclusive fitness to supply that need (connected, I may say, with such activity of the affections as even the preoccupations of a work too special to be abdicated could not uninterruptedly dissimulate), and each succeeding opportunity for observation has given the impression an added depth by convincing me more emphatically of that fitness which I had preconceived and thus evoking more decisively those affections to which I have but now referred. Our conversations have, I think, made sufficiently clear to you the tenor of my life and purposes: a tenor unsuited, I am aware, to the commoner order of minds. But I have discerned in you an elevation of thought and a capability of devotedness which I had hitherto not conceived to be compatible either with the early bloom of youth or with those graces of sex that may be said at once to win and to confer distinction when combined, as they notably are in you, with the mental qualities above indicated. It was, I confess, beyond my hope to meet with this rare combination of elements both solid and attractive, adapted to supply aid in graver labours and to cast a charm over vacant hours; and but for the event of my introduction to you (which, let me again say, I trust not to be superficially coincident with foreshadowing needs, but providentially related thereto as stages towards the completion of life's plan), I should presumably have gone on to the last without any attempt to lighten my solitariness by a matrimonial union.

Such, my dear Miss Brooke, is the accurate statement of my feelings, and I rely on your kind indulgence in venturing now to ask you how far your own are of a nature to confirm my happy presentiment. To be accepted by you as your husband and the earthly guardian of your welfare I should regard as the highest of providential gifts. In return I can at least offer you an affection hitherto unwasted and the faithful consecration of a life which, however short in the sequel, has no backward pages whereon, if you choose to turn them, you will find records such as might justly cause you either bitterness or shame. I await the expression of your sentiments with an anxiety which it would be the part of wisdom (were it possible) to divert by a more arduous labour than usual. But in this order of experience I am still young, and in looking forward to an unfavourable possibility, I cannot but feel that resignation to solitude will be more difficult after the temporary illumination of hope. In any case, I shall remain, yours with sincere devotion,

Edward Casaubon

Dorothea trembled while she read this letter; then she fell on her knees, buried her face, and sobbed. She could not pray; under the rush of solemn emotion in which thoughts became vague and images floated uncertainly, she could but cast herself, with a childlike sense of reclining, in the lap of a Divine consciousness which sustained her own. She remained in that attitude till it was time to dress for dinner.

How could it occur to her to examine the letter, to look at it critically as a profession of love? Her whole soul was possessed by the fact that a fuller life was opening before her: she was a neophyte about to enter on a higher grade of initiation. She was going to have room for the energies which stirred uneasily under the dimness and pressure of her own ignorance and the petty peremptoriness of the world's habits.

Now she would be able to devote herself to large yet definite duties; now she would be allowed to live continually in the light of a mind that she could reverence. This hope was not unmixed with the glow of proud delight—the joyous maiden surprise that she was chosen by the man whom her admiration had chosen. All Dorothea's passion was tranfused through a mind struggling towards an ideal life; the radiance of her transfigured girlhood fell on the first object that came within its level. The impetus with which inclination became resolution was heightened by those little events of the day which had roused her discontent with the actual conditions of her life.

After dinner, when Celia was playing an "air, with variations," a small kind of tinkling which symbolized the aesthetic part of the young ladies' education, Dorothea went up to her room to answer Mr. Casaubon's letter. Why should she defer the answer? She wrote it over three times, not because she wished to change the wording, but because her hand was unusually uncertain and she could not bear that Mr. Casaubon should think her handwriting bad and illegible. She piqued herself on writing a hand in which each letter was distinguishable without any large range of conjecture, and she meant to make much use of this accomplishment to save Mr. Casaubon's eyes. Three times she wrote.

My dear Mr. Casaubon, I am very grateful to you for loving me and thinking me worthy to be your wife. I can look forward to no better happiness than that which would be one with yours. If I said more, it would only be the same thing written out at greater length, for I cannot now dwell on any other thought than that I may be through life, yours devotedly,

Dorothea Brooke

Later in the evening she followed her uncle into the library to give him the letter, that he might send it in the morning.

He was surprised, but his surprise only issued in a few moments' silence, during which he pushed about various objects on his writing-table, and finally stood with his back to the fire, his glasses on his nose, looking at the address of Dorothea's letter.

"Have you thought enough about this, my dear?" he said at last.

"There was no need to think long, Uncle. I know of nothing to make me vacillate. If I changed my mind, it must be because of something important and entirely new to me."

"Ah! then you have accepted him? Then Chettam has no chance? Has Chettam offended you—offended you, you know? What is it you don't like in Chettam?"

"There is nothing that I like in him," said Dorothea rather impetuously.

Mr. Brooke threw his head and shoulders backward as if someone had thrown a light missile at him. Dorothea immediately felt some self-rebuke and said, "I mean in the light of a husband. He is very kind, I think—really very good about the cottages. A well-meaning man."

"But you must have a scholar, and that sort of thing? Well, it lies a little in our family. I had it myself—that love of knowledge, and going into everything—a little too much—it took me too far; though that sort of thing doesn't often run in the female line; or it runs underground like the rivers in Greece, you know—it comes out in the sons. Clever sons, clever mothers. I went a good deal into that at one time. However, my dear, I have always said that people should do as they like in these things, up to a certain point. I couldn't, as your guardian, have consented to a bad match. But Casaubon stands well; his position is good. I am afraid Chettam will be hurt, though, and Mrs. Cadwallader will blame me."

That evening, of course, Celia knew nothing of what had happened. She attributed Dorothea's abstracted manner and the evidence of further crying since they had got home to the temper she had been in about Sir James Chettam and the buildings, and was careful not to give further offence; having once said what she wanted to say, Celia had no disposition to recur to disagreeable subjects. It had been her nature when a child never to quarrel with anyone, only to observe with wonder that they quarrelled with her and looked like turkey-cocks; whereupon she was ready to play at cat's cradle with them whenever they recovered themselves. And as to Dorothea, it had always been her way to find something wrong in her sister's words, though Celia inwardly protested that she always said just how things were, and nothing else: she never did and never could put words together out of her own head. But the best of Dodo was that she did not keep angry for long together. Now, though they had hardly spoken to each other all the evening, yet when Celia put by her work, intending to go to bed, a proceeding in which she was always much the earlier, Dorothea, who was seated on a low stool, unable to occupy herself except in meditation, said with the musical intonation which in moments of deep but quiet feeling made her speech like a fine bit of recitative—

"Celia, dear, come and kiss me," holding her arms open as she spoke.

Celia knelt down to get the right level and gave her little butterfly kiss, while Dorothea encircled her with gentle arms and pressed her lips gravely on each cheek in turn.

"Don't sit up, Dodo, you are so pale tonight; go to bed soon," said Celia in a comfortable way without any touch of pathos.

"No, dear, I am very, very happy," said Dorothea fervently.

"So much the better," thought Celia. "But how strangely Dodo goes from one extreme to the other."

The next day, at luncheon, the butler, handing something to Mr. Brooke, said, "Jonas is come back, sir, and has brought this letter."

Mr. Brooke read the letter, and then, nodding towards Dorothea, said, "Casaubon, my dear—he will be here to dinner; he didn't wait to write more—didn't wait, you know."

It could not seem remarkable to Celia that a dinner guest should be announced to her sister beforehand, but, her eyes following the same direction as her uncle's, she was struck with the peculiar effect of the announcement on Dorothea. It seemed as if something like the reflection of a white sunlit wing had passed across her features, ending in one of her rare blushes. For the first time it entered into Celia's mind that there might be something more between Mr. Casaubon and her sister than his delight in bookish talk and her delight in listening. Hitherto she had classed the admiration for this "ugly" and learned acquaintance with the admiration for Monsieur Liret at Lausanne, also ugly and learned. Dorothea had never been tired of listening to old Monsieur Liret when Celia's feet were as cold as possible and when it had really become dreadful to see the skin of his bald head moving about. Why then should her enthusiasm not extend to Mr. Casaubon simply in the same way as to Monsieur Liret? And it seemed probable that all learned men had a sort of schoolmaster's view of young people.

But now Celia was really startled at the suspicion which had darted into her mind. She was seldom taken by surprise in this way, her marvellous quickness in observing a certain order of signs generally preparing her to expect such outward events as she had an interest in. Not that she now imagined Mr. Casaubon to be already an accepted lover; she had only begun to feel disgust at the possibility that anything in Dorothea's mind could tend towards such an issue. Here was something really to vex her about Dodo: it was all very well not to accept Sir James Chettam, but the idea of marrying Mr. Casaubon! Celia felt a sort of shame mingled with a sense of the ludicrous. But perhaps Dodo, if she were really bordering on such an extravagance, might be turned away from it; experience had often shown that her impressibility might be calculated on. The day was damp, and they were not going to walk out, so they both went up to their sitting-room; and there Celia observed that Dorothea, instead of settling down with her usual diligent interest to some occupation, simply leaned her elbow on an open book and looked out of the window at the great cedar silvered with the damp. She herself had taken up the making of a toy for the curate's children and was not going to enter on any subject too precipitately.

Dorothea was in fact thinking that it was desirable for Celia to know of the momentous change in Mr. Casaubon's position since he had last been in the house; it did not seem fair to leave her in ignorance of what would necessarily affect her attitude towards him; but it was impossible not to shrink from telling her. Dorothea accused herself of some meanness in this timidity; it was always odious to her to have any small fears or contrivances about her actions, but at this moment she was seeking the highest aid possible that she might not dread the corrosiveness of Celia's pretty, carnally minded prose.

Her reverie was broken, and the difficulty of decision banished by Celia's small and rather guttural voice speaking in its usual tone of a remark aside or a "by the by."

"Is anyone else coming to dine besides Mr. Casaubon?"

"Not that I know of."

"I hope there is someone else. Then I shall not hear him eat his soup so."

"What is there remarkable about his soup eating?"

"Really, Dodo, can't you hear how he scrapes his spoon? And he always blinks before he speaks. I don't know whether Locke blinked, but I'm sure I am sorry for those who sat opposite to him if he did."

"Celia," said Dorothea with emphatic gravity, "pray don't make any more observations of that kind."

"Why not? They are quite true," returned Celia, who had her reasons for persevering, though she was beginning to be a little afraid.

"Many things are true which only the commonest minds observe."

"Then I think the commonest minds must be rather useful. I think it is a pity Mr. Casaubon's mother had not a commoner mind: she might have taught him better." Celia was inwardly frightened and ready to run away, now she had hurled this light javelin.

Dorothea's feelings had gathered to an avalanche, and there could be no further preparation.

"It is right to tell you, Celia, that I am engaged to marry Mr. Casaubon."

Perhaps Celia had never turned so pale before. The paper man she was making would have had his leg injured but for her habitual care of whatever she held in her hands. She laid the fragile figure down at once and sat perfectly still for a few moments. When she spoke there was a tear gathering.

"Oh, Dodo, I hope you will be happy." Her sisterly tenderness could not but surmount other feelings at this moment, and her fears were the fears of affection.

Dorothea was still hurt and agitated.

"It is quite decided then?" said Celia in an awed undertone. "And Uncle knows?"

"I have accepted Mr. Casaubon's offer. My uncle brought me the letter that contained it; he knew about it beforehand."

"I beg your pardon if I have said anything to hurt you, Dodo," said Celia with a slight sob. She never could have thought that she should feel as she did. There was something funereal in the whole affair, and Mr. Casaubon seemed to be the officiating clergyman, about whom it would be indecent to make remarks.

"Never mind, Kitty, do not grieve. We should never admire the same people. I often offend in something of the same way; I am apt to speak too strongly of those who don't please me."

In spite of this magnanimity, Dorothea was still smarting, perhaps as much from Celia's subdued astonishment as from her small criticisms. Of course all the world round Tipton would be out of sympathy with this marriage. Dorothea knew of no one who thought as she did about life and its best objects.

Nevertheless, before the evening was at an end she was very happy. In an hour's *tête-à-tête* with Mr. Casaubon she talked to him with more freedom than she had ever felt before, even pouring out her joy at the thought of devoting herself to him and of learning how she might best share and further all his great ends. Mr. Casaubon was touched with an unknown delight (what man would not have been?) at this childlike, unrestrained ardour; he was not surprised (what lover would have been?) that he should be the object of it.

"My dear young lady—Miss Brooke—Dorothea!" he said, pressing her hand between his hands, "this is a happiness greater than I had ever imagined to be in reserve for me. That I should ever meet with a mind and person so rich in the mingled graces which could render marriage desirable was far indeed from my conception. You have all—nay, more than all—those qualities which I have ever regarded as the characteristic excellences of womanhood. The great charm of your sex is its capability of an ardent self-sacrificing affection, and herein we see its fitness to round and complete the existence of our own. Hitherto I have known few pleasures save of the severer kind; my satisfactions have been those of the solitary student. I have been little disposed to gather flowers that would wither in my hand, but now I shall pluck them with eagerness to place them in your bosom."

No speech could have been more thoroughly honest in its intention; the frigid rhetoric at the end was as sincere as the bark of a dog or the cawing of an amorous rook. Would it not be rash to conclude that there was no passion behind those sonnets to Delia which strike us as the thin music of a mandolin?

Dorothea's faith supplied all that Mr. Casaubon's words seemed to leave unsaid; what believer sees a disturbing omission or infelicity? The text, whether of prophet or of poet, expands for whatever we can put into it, and even his bad grammar is sublime.

"I am very ignorant—you will quite wonder at my ignorance," said Dorothea. "I have so many thoughts that may be quite mistaken, and now I shall be able to tell them all to you and ask you about them. But," she added with rapid imagination of Mr. Casaubon's probable feeling, "I will not trouble you too much, only when you are inclined to listen to me. You must often be weary with the pursuit of subjects in your own track. I shall gain enough if you will take me with you there."

"How should I be able now to persevere in any path without your companionship?" said Mr. Casaubon, kissing her candid brow and feeling that heaven had vouchsafed him a blessing in every way suited to his peculiar wants. He was being unconsciously wrought upon by the charms of a nature which was entirely without hidden calculations either for immediate effects or for remoter ends. It was this which made Dorothea so childlike, and according to some judges, so stupid, with all her reputed cleverness; as, for example, in the present case of throwing herself, metaphorically speaking, at Mr. Casaubon's feet and kissing his unfashionable shoe-ties as if he were a Protestant Pope. She was not in the least teaching Mr. Casaubon to ask if he were good enough for her, but merely asking herself anxiously how she could be good enough for Mr. Casaubon. Before he left the next day it had been decided that the marriage should take place within six weeks. Why not? Mr. Casaubon's house was ready. It was not a parsonage, but a considerable mansion with much land attached to it. The parsonage was inhabited by the curate, who did all the duty except preaching the morning sermon.

CHAPTER 6

My lady's tongue is like the meadow blades,
That cut you stroking them with idle hand.
Nice cutting is her function: she divides
With spiritual edge the millet-seed,
And makes intangible savings.

As Mr. Casaubon's carriage was passing out of the gateway, it arrested the entrance of a pony phaeton driven by a lady with a servant seated behind. It was doubtful whether the recognition had been mutual, for Mr. Casaubon was looking absently before him; but the lady was quick-eyed and threw a nod and a "how do you do?" in the nick of time. In spite of her shabby bonnet and very old Indian shawl, it was plain that the lodge-keeper regarded her as an important personage from the low curtsy which was dropped on the entrance of the small phaeton.

"Well, Mrs. Fitchett, how are your fowls laying now?" said the high-coloured, dark-eyed lady with the clearest, chiselled utterance.

"Pretty well for laying, Madam, but they've ta'en to eating their eggs; I've no peace o' mind with 'em at all."

"Oh, the cannibals! Better sell them cheap at once. What will you sell them a couple? One can't eat fowls of a bad character at a high price."

"Well, Madam, half a crown: I couldn't let 'em go, not under."

"Half a crown, these times! Come now, for the rector's chicken broth on a Sunday. He has consumed all ours that I can spare. You are half paid with the sermon, Mrs. Fitchett, remember that. Take a pair of tumbler-pigeons for them, little beauties. You must come and see them. You have no tumblers among your pigeons."

"Well, Madam, Master Fitchett shall go and see 'em after work. He's very hot on new sorts: to oblige *you*."

"Oblige me! It will be the best bargain he ever made. A pair of church pigeons for a couple of wicked Spanish fowls that eat their own eggs! Don't you and Fitchett boast too much, that is all!"

The phaeton was driven onwards with the last words, leaving Mrs. Fitchett laughing and shaking her head slowly, with an interjectional "Sure*ly*, sure*ly*!" from which it might be inferred that she would have found the countryside somewhat duller if the rector's lady had been less free-spoken and less of a skinflint. Indeed, both the farmers and labourers in the parishes of Freshitt and Tipton would have felt a sad lack of conversation but for the stories about what Mrs. Cadwallader said and did: a lady of immeasurably high birth, descended, as it were, from unknown earls, dim as the crowd of heroic shades—who pleaded poverty, pared down prices, and cut jokes in the most companionable manner, though with a turn of tongue that let you know who she was. Such a lady gave a neighbourliness to both rank and religion and mitigated the bitterness of uncommuted tithe. A much more exemplary character with an infusion of sour dignity would not have furthered their comprehension of the Thirty-nine Articles and would have been less socially uniting.

Mr. Brooke, seeing Mrs. Cadwallader's merits from a different point of view, winced a little when her name was announced in the library, where he was sitting alone.

"I see you have had our Lowick Cicero here," she said, seating herself comfortably, throwing back her wraps, and showing a thin but well-built figure. "I suspect you and he are brewing some bad politics, else you would not be seeing so much of the lively man. I shall inform against you: remember you are both suspicious characters since you took Peel's side about the Catholic bill. I shall tell everybody that you are going to put up for Middlemarch on the Whig side when old Pinkerton resigns and that Casaubon is going to help you in an underhand manner, going to bribe the voters with pamphlets and throw open the public-houses to distribute them. Come, confess!"

"Nothing of the sort," said Mr. Brooke, smiling and rubbing his eyeglasses, but really blushing a little at the impeachment. "Casaubon and I don't talk politics much. He doesn't care much about the philanthropic side of things, punishments, and that kind of thing. He only cares about Church questions. That is not my line of action, you know."

"Ra-a-ther too much, my friend. *I* have heard of your doings. Who was it that sold his bit of land to the papists at Middlemarch? I believe you bought it on purpose. You are a perfect Guy Faux. See if you are not burnt in effigy this fifth of November coming. Humphrey would not come to quarrel with you about it, so I am come."

"Very good. I was prepared to be persecuted for not persecuting—not persecuting, you know."

"There you go! That is a piece of clap-trap you have got ready for the hustings. Now, *do not* let them lure you to the hustings, my dear Mr. Brooke. A man always makes a fool of himself, speechifying; there's no excuse but being on the right side so that you can ask a blessing on your humming and hawing. You will lose yourself, I forewarn you. You will make a Saturday pie of all parties' opinions, and be pelted by everybody."

"That is what I expect, you know," said Mr. Brooke, not wishing to betray how little he enjoyed this prophetic sketch. "What I expect as an independent man. As to the Whigs, a man who goes with the thinkers is not likely to be hooked on by any party. He may go with them up to a certain point—up to a certain point, you know. But that is what you ladies never understand."

"Where your certain point is? No. I should like to be told how a man can have any certain point when he belongs to no party—leading a roving life and never letting his friends know his address. 'Nobody knows where Brooke will be—there's

no counting on Brooke'—that is what people say of you, to be quite frank. Now, do turn respectable. How will you like going to sessions with everybody looking shy on you, and you with a bad conscience and an empty pocket?"

"I don't pretend to argue with a lady on politics," said Mr. Brooke with an air of smiling indifference but feeling rather unpleasantly conscious that this attack of Mrs. Cadwallader's had opened the defensive campaign to which certain rash steps had exposed him. "Your sex are not thinkers, you know—*varium et mutabile semper*—that kind of thing. You don't know Vergil. I knew"—Mr. Brooke reflected in time that he had not had the personal acquaintance of the Augustan poet—"I was going to say, poor Stoddart, you know. That was what *he* said. You ladies are always against an independent attitude—a man's caring for nothing but truth, and that sort of thing. And there is no part of the county where opinion is narrower than it is here—I don't mean to throw stones, you know, but somebody is wanted to take the independent line; and if I don't take it, who will?"

"Who? Why, any upstart who has got neither blood nor position. People of standing should consume their independent nonsense at home, not hawk it about. And you! Who are going to marry your niece, as good as your daughter, to one of our best men. Sir James would be cruelly annoyed; it will be too hard on him if you turn round now and make yourself a Whig signboard."

Mr. Brooke again winced inwardly, for Dorothea's engagement had no sooner been decided than he had thought of Mrs. Cadwallader's prospective taunts. It might have been easy for ignorant observers to say, "Quarrel with Mrs. Cadwallader," but where is a country gentleman to go who quarrels with his oldest neighbours? Who could taste the fine flavour in the name of Brooke if it were delivered casually like wine without a seal? Certainly a man can only be cosmopolitan up to a certain point.

"I hope Chettam and I shall always be good friends; but I am sorry to say there is no prospect of his marrying my niece," said Mr. Brooke, much relieved to see through the window that Celia was coming in.

"Why not?" said Mrs. Cadwallader with a sharp note of surprise. "It is hardly a fortnight since you and I were talking about it."

"My niece has chosen another suitor—has chosen him, you know. I have had nothing to do with it. I should have preferred Chettam, and I should have said Chettam was the man any girl would have chosen. But there is no accounting for these things. Your sex is capricious, you know."

"Why, whom do you mean to say that you are going to let her marry?" Mrs. Cadwallader's mind was rapidly surveying the possibilities of choice for Dorothea.

But here Celia entered, blooming from a walk in the garden, and the greeting with her delivered Mr. Brooke from the necessity of answering immediately. He got up hastily, and saying, "By the way, I must speak to Wright about the horses," shuffled quickly out of the room.

"My dear child, what is this—this about your sister's engagement?" said Mrs. Cadwallader.

"She is engaged to marry Mr. Casaubon," said Cecilia, resorting as usual to the simplest statement of fact and enjoying this opportunity of speaking to the rector's wife alone.

"This is frightful. How long has it been going on?"

"I only knew of it yesterday. They are to be married in six weeks."

"Well, my dear, I wish you joy of your brother-in-law."

"I am so sorry for Dorothea."

"Sorry! It is her doing, I suppose."

"Yes; she says Mr. Casaubon has a great soul."

"With all my heart."

"Oh, Mrs. Cadwallader, I don't think it can be nice to marry a man with a great soul."

"Well, my dear, take warning. You know the look of one now; when the next comes and wants to marry you, don't you accept him."

"I'm sure I never should."

"No; one such in a family is enough. So your sister never cared about Sir James Chettam? What would you have said to *him* for a brother-in-law?"

"I should have liked that very much. I am sure he would have been a good husband. Only," Celia added with a slight blush (she sometimes seemed to blush as she breathed), "I don't think he would have suited Dorothea."

"Not high-flown enough?"

"Dodo is very strict. She thinks so much about everything and is so particular about what one says. Sir James never seemed to please her."

"She must have encouraged him, I am sure. That is not very creditable."

"Please don't be angry with Dodo; she does not see things. She thought so much about the cottages, and she *was* rude to Sir James sometimes; but he is so kind, he never noticed it."

"Well," said Mrs. Cadwallader, putting on her shawl and rising as if in haste, "I must go straight to Sir James and break this to him. He will have brought his mother back by this time, and I must call. Your uncle will never tell him. We are disappointed, my dear. Young people should think of their families in marrying. I set a bad example—married a poor clergyman, and made myself a pitiable object among the De Bracys—obliged to get my coals by stratagem and pray to heaven for my salad oil. However, Casaubon has money enough; I must do him that justice. As to his blood, I suppose the family quarterings are three cuttle-fish sable, and a commentator rampant. By the by, before I go, my dear, I must speak to your Mrs. Carter about pastry. I want to send my young cook to learn of her. Poor people with four children, like us, you know, can't afford to keep a good cook. I have no doubt Mrs. Carter will oblige me. Sir James's cook is a perfect dragon."

In less than an hour Mrs. Cadwallader had circumvented Mrs. Carter and driven to Freshitt Hall, which was not far from her own parsonage, her husband being resident in Freshitt and keeping a curate in Tipton.

Sir James Chettam had returned from the short journey which had kept him absent for a couple of days and had changed his dress, intending to ride over to Tipton Grange. His horse was standing at the door when Mrs. Cadwallader

drove up, and he immediately appeared there himself, whip in hand. Lady Chettam had not yet returned, but Mrs. Cadwallader's errand could not be dispatched in the presence of grooms, so she asked to be taken into the conservatory close by to look at the new plants; and on coming to a contemplative stand, she said, "I have a great shock for you; I hope you are not so far gone in love as you pretend to be."

It was of no use protesting against Mrs. Cadwallader's way of putting things. But Sir James's countenance changed a little. He felt a vague alarm.

"I do believe Brooke is going to expose himself after all. I accused him of meaning to stand for Middlemarch on the Liberal side, and he looked silly and never denied it—talked about the independent line and the usual nonsense."

"Is that all?" said Sir James, much relieved.

"Why," rejoined Mrs. Cadwallader, with a sharper note, "you don't mean to say that you would like him to turn public man in that way—making a sort of political Cheap Jack of himself?"

"He might be dissuaded, I should think. He would not like the expense."

"That is what I told him. He is vulnerable to reason there—always a few grains of common sense in an ounce of miserliness. Miserliness is a capital quality to run in families; it's the safe side for madness to dip on. And there must be a little crack in the Brooke family, else we should not see what we are to see."

"What? Brooke standing for Middlemarch?"

"Worse than that. I really feel a little responsible. I always told you Miss Brooke would be such a fine match. I knew there was a great deal of nonsense in her, a flighty sort of Methodistical stuff. But these things wear out of girls. However, I am taken by surprise for once."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Cadwallader?" said Sir James. His fear lest Miss Brooke should have run away to join the Moravian brethren or some preposterous sect unknown to good society was a little allayed by the knowledge that Mrs. Cadwallader always made the worst of things. "What has happened to Miss Brooke? Pray speak out."

"Very well. She is engaged to be married." Mrs. Cadwallader paused a few moments, observing the deeply hurt expression in her friend's face, which he was trying to conceal by a nervous smile while he whipped his boot. But she soon added, "Engaged to Casaubon."

Sir James let his whip fall and stooped to pick it up. Perhaps his face had never before gathered so much concentrated disgust as when he turned to Mrs. Cadwallader and repeated, "Casaubon?"

"Even so. You know my errand now."

"Good God! It is horrible! He is not better than a mummy!" (The point of view has to be allowed for as that of a blooming and disappointed rival.)

"She says he is a great soul. A great bladder for dried peas to rattle in!" said Mrs. Cadwallader.

"What business has an old bachelor like that to marry!" said Sir James. "He has one foot in the grave."

"He means to draw it out again, I suppose."

"Brooke ought not to allow it; he should insist on its being put off till she is of age. She would think better of it then. What is a guardian for?"

"As if you could ever squeeze a resolution out of Brooke!"

"Cadwallader might talk to him."

"Not he! Humphrey finds everybody charming. I never can get him to abuse Casaubon. He will even speak well of the bishop, though I tell him it is unnatural in a beneficed clergyman; what can one do with a husband who attends so little to the decencies? I hide it as well as I can by abusing everybody myself. Come, come, cheer up! You are well rid of Miss Brooke, a girl who would have been requiring you to see the stars by daylight. Between ourselves, little Celia is worth two of her, and likely after all to be the better match. For this marriage to Casaubon is as good as going to a nunnery."

"Oh, on my own account—it is for Miss Brooke's sake I think her friends should try to use their influence."

"Well, Humphrey doesn't know yet. But when I tell him, you may depend on it he will say, 'Why not? Casaubon is a good fellow—and young—young enough.' These charitable people never know vinegar from wine till they have swallowed it and got the colic. However, if I were a man I should prefer Celia, especially when Dorothea was gone. The truth is, you have been courting one and have won the other. I can see that she admires you almost as much as a man expects to be admired. If it were anyone but me who said so, you might think it exaggeration. Good-bye!"

Sir James handed Mrs. Cadwallader to the phaeton and then jumped on his horse. He was not going to renounce his ride because of his friend's unpleasant news, only to ride the faster in some other direction than that of Tipton Grange.

Now, why on earth should Mrs. Cadwallader have been at all busy about Miss Brooke's marriage; and why, when one match that she liked to think she had a hand in was frustrated, should she have straightway contrived the preliminaries of another? Was there any ingenious plot, any hide-and-seek course of action, which might be detected by a careful telescopic watch? Not at all; a telescope might have swept the parishes of Tipton and Freshitt, the whole area visited by Mrs. Cadwallader in her phaeton, without witnessing any interview that could excite suspicion or any scene from which she did not return with the same unperturbed keenness of eye and the same high natural colour. In fact, if that convenient vehicle had existed in the days of the Seven Sages, one of them would doubtless have remarked that you can know little of women by following them about in their pony phaetons. Even with a microscope directed on a water drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom. In this way, metaphorically speaking, a strong lens applied to Mrs. Cadwallader's matchmaking will show a play of minute causes producing what may be called thought and speech vortices to bring her the sort of food she needed.

Her life was rurally simple, quite free from secrets either foul, dangerous, or otherwise important, and not consciously affected by the great affairs of the world. All the more did the affairs of the great world interest her when communicated in the letters of high-born relations: the way in which fascinating younger sons had gone to the dogs by marrying their

mistresses; the fine old-blooded idiocy of young Lord Tapir, and the furious gouty humours of old Lord Megatherium; the exact crossing of genealogies which had brought a coronet into a new branch and widened the relations of scandal—these were topics of which she retained details with the utmost accuracy and reproduced them in an excellent pickle of epigrams which she herself enjoyed the more because she believed as unquestioningly in birth and no-birth as she did in game and vermin. She would never have disowned anyone on the ground of poverty: a De Bracy reduced to take his dinner in a basin would have seemed to her an example of pathos worth exaggerating, and I fear his aristocratic vices would not have horrified her. But her feeling towards the vulgar rich was a sort of religious hatred; they had probably made all their money out of high retail prices, and Mrs. Cadwallader detested high prices for everything that was not paid in kind at the rectory: such people were no part of God's design in making the world, and their accent was an affliction to the ears. A town where such monsters abounded was hardly more than a sort of low comedy, which could not be taken account of in a well-bred scheme of the universe. Let any lady who is inclined to be hard on Mrs. Cadwallader inquire into the comprehensiveness of her own beautiful views and be quite sure that they afford accommodation for all the lives which have the honour to coexist with hers.

With such a mind, active as phosphorus, biting everything that came near into the form that suited it, how could Mrs. Cadwallader feel that the Miss Brookes and their matrimonial prospects were alien to her? Especially as it had been the habit of years for her to scold Mr. Brooke with the friendliest frankness and let him know in confidence that she thought him a poor creature. From the first arrival of the young ladies in Tipton she had prearranged Dorothea's marriage with Sir James, and if it had taken place would have been quite sure that it was her doing; that it should not take place after she had pre-conceived it, caused her an irritation which every thinker will sympathize with. She was the diplomatist of Tipton and Freshitt, and for anything to happen in spite of her was an offensive irregularity. As to freaks like this of Miss Brooke's, Mrs. Cadwallader had no patience with them, and now saw that her opinion of this girl had been infected with some of her husband's weak charitableness: those Methodistical whims, that air of being more religious than the rector and curate together, came from a deeper and more constitutional disease than she had been willing to believe.

"However," said Mrs. Cadwallader, first to herself and afterwards to her husband, "I throw her over; there was a chance, if she had married Sir James, of her becoming a sane, sensible woman. He would never have contradicted her, and when a woman is not contradicted, she has no motive for obstinacy in her absurdities. But now I wish her joy of her hair shirt."

It followed that Mrs. Cadwallader must decide on another match for Sir James, and having made up her mind that it was to be the younger Miss Brooke, there could not have been a more skilful move towards the success of her plan than her hint to the baronet that he had made an impression on Celia's heart. For he was not one of those gentlemen who languish after the unattainable Sappho's apple that laughs from the topmost bough—the charms which

> Smile like the knot of cowslips on the cliff,
> Not to be come at by the willing hand.

He had no sonnets to write, and it could not strike him agreeably that he was not an object of preference to the woman whom he had preferred. Already the knowledge that Dorothea had chosen Mr. Casaubon had bruised his attachment and relaxed its hold. Although Sir James was a sportsman, he had some other feelings towards women than towards grouse and foxes and did not regard his future wife in the light of prey, valuable chiefly for the excitements of the chase. Neither was he so well acquainted with the habits of primitive races as to feel that an ideal combat for her, tomahawk in hand, so to speak, was necessary to the historical continuity of the marriage-tie. On the contrary, having the amiable vanity which knits us to those who are fond of us and disinclines us to those who are indifferent, and also a good grateful nature, the mere idea that a woman had a kindness towards him spun little threads of tenderness from out his heart towards hers.

Thus it happened that after Sir James had ridden rather fast for half an hour in a direction away from Tipton Grange, he slackened his pace and at last turned into a road which would lead him back by a shorter cut. Various feelings wrought in him the determination after all to go to the Grange today as if nothing new had happened. He could not help rejoicing that he had never made the offer and been rejected; mere friendly politeness required that he should call to see Dorothea about the cottages, and now happily Mrs. Cadwallader had prepared him to offer his congratulations, if necessary, without showing too much awkwardness. He really did not like it; giving up Dorothea was very painful to him, but there was something in the resolve to make this visit forthwith and conquer all show of feeling, which was a sort of file-biting and counter-irritant. And without his distinctly recognizing the impulse, there certainly was present in him the sense that Celia would be there and that he should pay her more attention than he had done before.

We mortals, men and women, devour many a disappointment between breakfast and dinnertime, keep back the tears and look a little pale about the lips, and in answer to inquiries say, "Oh, nothing!" Pride helps us, and pride is not a bad thing when it only urges us to hide our own hurts—not to hurt others.

CHAPTER 7

Piacer e popone
Vuol la sua stagione.

—ITALIAN PROVERB

Mr. Casaubon, as might be expected, spent a great deal of his time at the Grange in these weeks, and the hindrance which courtship occasioned to the progress of his great work—the *Key to All Mythologies*—naturally made him look forward the more eagerly to the happy termination of courtship. But he had deliberately incurred the hindrance, having made up his mind that it was now time for him to adorn his life with the graces of female companionship, to irradiate the gloom which fatigue was apt to hang over the intervals of studious labour with the play of female fancy, and to secure in this, his culminating age, the solace of female tendance for his declining years. Hence he determined to abandon himself to the stream of feeling, and perhaps was surprised to find what an exceedingly shallow rill it was. As in droughty regions baptism by immersion could only be performed symbolically, so Mr. Casaubon found that sprinkling was the utmost approach to a plunge which his stream would afford him; and he concluded that the poets had much exaggerated the force of masculine passion. Nevertheless, he observed with pleasure that Miss Brooke showed an ardent, submissive affection which promised to fulfil his most agreeable previsions of marriage. It had once or twice crossed his mind that possibly there was some deficiency in Dorothea to account for the moderation of his abandonment, but he was unable to discern the deficiency or to figure to himself a woman who would have pleased him better so that there was clearly no reason to fall back upon but the exaggerations of human tradition.

"Could I not be preparing myself now to be more useful?" said Dorothea to him one morning early in the time of courtship; "could I not learn to read Latin and Greek aloud to you, as Milton's daughters did to their father, without understanding what they read?"

"I fear that would be wearisome to you," said Mr. Casaubon, smiling; "and, indeed, if I remember rightly, the young women you have mentioned regarded that exercise in unknown tongues as a ground for rebellion against the poet."

"Yes; but in the first place they were very naughty girls, else they would have been proud to minister to such a father; and in the second place they might have studied privately and taught themselves to understand what they read, and then it would have been interesting. I hope you don't expect me to be naughty and stupid?"

"I expect you to be all that an exquisite young lady can be in every possible relation of life. Certainly it might be a great advantage if you were able to copy the Greek character, and to that end it were well to begin with a little reading."

Dorothea seized this as a precious permission. She would not have asked Mr. Casaubon at once to teach her the languages, dreading of all things to be tiresome instead of helpful; but it was not entirely out of devotion to her future husband that she wished to know Latin and Greek. Those provinces of masculine knowledge seemed to her a standing-ground from which all truth could be seen more truly. As it was, she constantly doubted her own conclusions because she felt her own ignorance: how could she be confident that one-roomed cottages were not for the glory of God when men who knew the classics appeared to conciliate indifference to the cottages with zeal for the glory? Perhaps even Hebrew might be necessary—at least the alphabet and a few roots—in order to arrive at the core of things and judge soundly on the social duties of the Christian. And she had not reached that point of renunciation at which she would have been satisfied with having a wise husband; she wished, poor child, to be wise herself. Miss Brooke was certainly very naïve with all her alleged cleverness. Celia, whose mind had never been thought too powerful, saw the emptiness of other people's pretensions much more readily. To have in general but little feeling seems to be the only security against feeling too much on any particular occasion.

However, Mr. Casaubon consented to listen and teach for an hour together, like a schoolmaster of little boys, or rather like a lover, to whom a mistress's elementary ignorance and difficulties have a touching fitness. Few scholars would have disliked teaching the alphabet under such circumstances. But Dorothea herself was a little shocked and discouraged at her own stupidity, and the answers she got to some timid questions about the value of the Greek accents gave her a painful suspicion that here indeed there might be secrets not capable of explanation to a woman's reason.

Mr. Brooke had no doubt on that point and expressed himself with his usual strength upon it one day that he came into the library while the reading was going forward.

"Well, but now, Casaubon, such deep studies, classics, mathematics, that kind of thing, are too taxing for a woman—too taxing, you know."

"Dorothea is learning to read the characters simply," said Mr. Casaubon, evading the question. "She had the very considerate thought of saving my eyes."

"Ah, well, without understanding, you know—that may not be so bad. But there is a lightness about the feminine mind—a touch and go—music, the fine arts, that kind of thing; they should study those up to a certain point, women should, but in a light way, you know. A woman should be able to sit down and play you or sing you a good old English tune. That is what I like; though I have heard most things—been at the opera in Vienna: Gluck, Mozart, everything of that sort. But I'm a conservative in music—it's not like ideas, you know. I stick to the good old tunes."

"Mr. Casaubon is not fond of the piano, and I am very glad he is not," said Dorothea, whose slight regard for domestic

music and feminine fine art must be forgiven her, considering the small tinkling and smearing in which they chiefly consisted at that dark period. She smiled and looked up at her betrothed with grateful eyes. If he had always been asking her to play the “Last Rose of Summer,” she would have required much resignation. “He says there is only an old harpsichord at Lowick, and it is covered with books.”

“Ah, there you are behind Celia, my dear. Celia, now, plays very prettily, and is always ready to play. However, since Casaubon does not like it, you are all right. But it’s a pity you should not have little recreations of that sort, Casaubon: the bow always strung—that kind of thing, you know—will not do.”

“I never could look on it in the light of a recreation to have my ears teased with measured noises,” said Mr. Casaubon. “A tune much iterated has the ridiculous effect of making the words in my mind perform a sort of minuet to keep time—an effect hardly tolerable, I imagine, after boyhood. As to the grander forms of music, worthy to accompany solemn celebrations and even to serve as an educating influence according to the ancient conception, I say nothing, for with these we are not immediately concerned.”

“No, but music of that sort I should enjoy,” said Dorothea. “When we were coming home from Lausanne my uncle took us to hear the great organ at Freiberg, and it made me sob.”

“That kind of thing is not healthy, my dear,” said Mr. Brooke. “Casaubon, she will be in your hands now; you must teach my niece to take things more quietly, eh, Dorothea?”

He ended with a smile, not wishing to hurt his niece, but really thinking that it was perhaps better for her to be early married to so sober a fellow as Casaubon since she would not hear of Chettam.

“It is wonderful, though,” he said to himself as he shuffled out of the room, “it is wonderful that she should have liked him. However, the match is good. I should have been travelling out of my brief to have hindered it, let Mrs. Cadwallader say what she will. He is pretty certain to be a bishop, is Casaubon. That was a very seasonable pamphlet of his on the Catholic Question. A deanery at least. They owe him a deanery.”

And here I must vindicate a claim to philosophical reflectiveness by remarking that Mr. Brooke on this occasion little thought of the radical speech which, at a later period, he was led to make on the incomes of the bishops. What elegant historian would neglect a striking opportunity for pointing out that his heroes did not foresee the history of the world, or even their own actions? For example, that Henry of Navarre, when a Protestant baby, little thought of being a Catholic monarch; or that Alfred the Great, when he measured his laborious nights with burning candles, had no idea of future gentlemen measuring their idle days with watches. Here is a mine of truth, which, however vigorously it may be worked, is likely to outlast our coal.

But of Mr. Brooke I make a further remark perhaps less warranted by precedent—namely, that if he had foreknown his speech, it might not have made any great difference. To think with pleasure of his niece’s husband having a large ecclesiastical income was one thing; to make a Liberal speech was another thing, and it is a narrow mind which cannot look at a subject from various points of view.

CHAPTER 8

> Oh, rescue her! I am her brother now,
> And you her father. Every gentle maid
> Should have a guardian in each gentleman.

It was wonderful to Sir James Chettam how well he continued to like going to the Grange after he had once encountered the difficulty of seeing Dorothea for the first time in the light of a woman who was engaged to another man. Of course the forked lightning seemed to pass through him when he first approached her, and he remained conscious throughout the interview of hiding uneasiness; but good as he was, it must be owned that his uneasiness was less than it would have been if he had thought his rival a brilliant and desirable match. He had no sense of being eclipsed by Mr. Casaubon; he was only shocked that Dorothea was under a melancholy illusion, and his mortification lost some of its bitterness by being mingled with compassion.

Nevertheless, while Sir James said to himself that he had completely resigned her, since with the perversity of a Desdemona she had not affected a proposed match that was clearly suitable and according to nature, he could not yet be quite passive under the idea of her engagement to Mr. Casaubon. On the day when he first saw them together in the light of his present knowledge, it seemed to him that he had not taken the affair seriously enough. Brooke was really culpable; he ought to have hindered it. Who could speak to him? Something might be done perhaps even now, at least to defer the marriage. On his way home he turned into the rectory and asked for Mr. Cadwallader. Happily, the rector was at home, and his visitor was shown into the study, where all the fishing-tackle hung. But he himself was in a little room adjoining, at work with his turning apparatus, and he called to the baronet to join him there. The two were better friends than any other landholder and clergyman in the county, a significant fact which was in agreement with the amiable expression of their faces.

Mr. Cadwallader was a large man with full lips and a sweet smile; very plain and rough in his exterior, but with that solid, imperturbable ease and good humour which is infectious, and like great grassy hills in the sunshine, quiets even an irritated egoism and makes it rather ashamed of itself. “Well, how are you?” he said, showing a hand not quite fit to be grasped. “Sorry I missed you before. Is there anything particular? You look vexed.”

Sir James’s brow had a little crease in it, a little depression of the eyebrow, which he seemed purposely to exaggerate as he answered.

“It is only this conduct of Brooke’s. I really think somebody should speak to him.”

“What? Meaning to stand?” said Mr. Cadwallader, going on with the arrangement of the reels which he had just been turning. “I hardly think he means it. But where’s the harm, if he likes it? Anyone who objects to Whiggery should be glad when the Whigs don’t put up the strongest fellow. They won’t overturn the constitution with our friend Brooke’s head for a battering ram.”

“Oh, I don’t mean that,” said Sir James, who after putting down his hat and throwing himself into a chair had begun to nurse his leg and examine the sole of his boot with much bitterness. “I mean this marriage. I mean his letting that blooming young girl marry Casaubon.”

“What is the matter with Casaubon? I see no harm in him, if the girl likes him.”

“She is too young to know what she likes. Her guardian ought to interfere. He ought not to allow the thing to be done in this headlong manner. I wonder a man like you, Cadwallader—a man with daughters—can look at the affair with indifference; and with such a heart as yours! Do think seriously about it.”

“I am not joking; I am as serious as possible,” said the rector with a provoking little inward laugh. “You are as bad as Elinor. She has been wanting me to go and lecture Brooke, and I have reminded her that her friends had a very poor opinion of the match she made when she married me.”

“But look at Casaubon,” said Sir James indignantly. “He must be fifty, and I don’t believe he could ever have been much more than the shadow of a man. Look at his legs!”

“Confound you handsome young fellows! You think of having it all your own way in the world. You don’t understand women. They don’t admire you half so much as you admire yourselves. Elinor used to tell her sisters that she married me for my ugliness—it was so various and amusing that it had quite conquered her prudence.”

“You! It was easy enough for a woman to love you. But this is no question of beauty. I don’t *like* Casaubon.” This was Sir James’s strongest way of implying that he thought ill of a man’s character.

“Why? What do you know against him?” said the rector, laying down his reels and putting his thumbs into his arm-holes with an air of attention.

Sir James paused. He did not usually find it easy to give his reasons; it seemed to him strange that people should not know them without being told, since he only felt what was reasonable. At last he said, “Now, Cadwallader, has he got any heart?”

“Well, yes. I don’t mean of the melting sort, but a sound kernel, *that* you may be sure of. He is very good to his poor relations: pensions several of the women, and is educating a young fellow at a good deal of expense. Casaubon acts up to

his sense of justice. His mother's sister made a bad match—a Pole, I think—lost herself—at any rate was disowned by her family. If it had not been for that, Casaubon would not have had so much money by half. I believe he went himself to find out his cousins and see what he could do for them. Every man would not ring so well as that if you tried his metal. *You* would, Chettam, but not every man."

"I don't know," said Sir James, colouring. "I am not so sure of myself." He paused a moment and then added, "That was a right thing for Casaubon to do. But a man may wish to do what is right, and yet be a sort of parchment code. A woman may not be happy with him. And I think when a girl is so young as Miss Brooke is, her friends ought to interfere a little to hinder her from doing anything foolish. You laugh because you fancy I have some feeling on my own account. But upon my honour, it is not that. I should feel just the same if I were Miss Brooke's brother or uncle."

"Well, but what should you do?"

"I should say that the marriage must not be decided on until she was of age. And depend upon it, in that case, it would never come off. I wish you saw it as I do; I wish you would talk to Brooke about it."

Sir James rose as he was finishing his sentence, for he saw Mrs. Cadwallader entering from the study. She held by the hand her youngest girl, about five years old, who immediately ran to papa and was made comfortable on his knee.

"I hear what you are talking about," said the wife. "But you will make no impression on Humphrey. As long as the fish rise to his bait, everybody is what he ought to be. Bless you, Casaubon has got a trout-stream and does not care about fishing in it himself: could there be a better fellow?"

"Well, there is something in that," said the rector with his quiet, inward laugh. "It is a very good quality in a man to have a trout-stream."

"But seriously," said Sir James, whose vexation had not yet spent itself, "don't you think the rector might do some good by speaking?"

"Oh, I told you beforehand what he would say," answered Mrs. Cadwallader, lifting up her eyebrows. "I have done what I could; I wash my hands of the marriage."

"In the first place," said the rector, looking rather grave, "it would be nonsensical to expect that I could convince Brooke and make him act accordingly. Brooke is a very good fellow, but pulpy; he will run into any mould, but he won't keep shape."

"He might keep shape long enough to defer the marriage," said Sir James.

"But, my dear Chettam, why should I use my influence to Casaubon's disadvantage unless I were much surer than I am that I should be acting for the advantage of Miss Brooke? I know no harm of Casaubon. I don't care about his Xisuthrus and Fee-fo-fum and the rest; but then he doesn't care about my fishing-tackle. As to the line he took on the Catholic Question, that was unexpected; but he has always been civil to me, and I don't see why I should spoil his sport. For anything I can tell, Miss Brooke may be happier with him than she would be with any other man."

"Humphrey! I have no patience with you. You know you would rather dine under the hedge than with Casaubon alone. You have nothing to say to each other."

"What has that to do with Miss Brooke's marrying him? She does not do it for my amusement."

"He has got no good red blood in his body," said Sir James.

"No. Somebody put a drop under a magnifying-glass, and it was all semicolons and parentheses," said Mrs. Cadwallader.

"Why does he not bring out his book, instead of marrying?" said Sir James with a disgust which he held warranted by the sound feeling of an English layman.

"Oh, he dreams footnotes, and they run away with all his brains. They say when he was a little boy he made an abstract of 'Hop o' My Thumb,' and he has been making abstracts ever since. Ugh! And that is the man Humphrey goes on saying that a woman may be happy with."

"Well, he is what Miss Brooke likes," said the rector. "I don't profess to understand every young lady's taste."

"But if she were your own daughter?" said Sir James.

"That would be a different affair. She is *not* my daughter, and I don't feel called upon to interfere. Casaubon is as good as most of us. He is a scholarly clergyman and creditable to the cloth. Some radical fellow speechifying at Middlemarch said Casaubon was the learned straw-chopping incumbent, and Freke was the brick-and-mortar incumbent, and I was the angling incumbent. And upon my word, I don't see that one is worse or better than the other." The rector ended with his silent laugh. He always saw the joke of any satire against himself. His conscience was large and easy, like the rest of him: it did only what it could do without any trouble.

Clearly, there would be no interference with Miss Brooke's marriage through Mr. Cadwallader; and Sir James felt with some sadness that she was to have perfect liberty of misjudgement. It was a sign of his good disposition that he did not slacken at all in his intention of carrying out Dorothea's design of the cottages. Doubtless this persistence was the best course for his own dignity. But pride only helps us to be generous; it never makes us so, any more than vanity makes us witty. She was now enough aware of Sir James's position with regard to her to appreciate the rectitude of his perseverance in a landlord's duty, to which he had at first been urged by a lover's complaisance, and her pleasure in it was great enough to count for something even in her present happiness. Perhaps she gave to Sir James Chettam's cottages all the interest she could spare from Mr. Casaubon, or rather from the symphony of hopeful dreams, admiring trust, and passionate self-devotion which that learned gentleman had set playing in her soul. Hence it happened that in the good baronet's succeeding visits, while he was beginning to pay small attentions to Celia, he found himself talking with more and more pleasure to Dorothea. She was perfectly unconstrained and without irritation towards him now, and he was gradually discovering the delight there is in frank kindness and companionship between a man and a woman who have no passion to hide or confess.

CHAPTER 9

1ST GENT. An ancient land in ancient oracles
Is called "law-thirsty"; all the struggle there
Was after order and a perfect rule.
Pray, where lie such lands now? . . .
2ND GENT. Why, where they lay of old—in human souls.

Mr. Casaubon's behaviour about settlements was highly satisfactory to Mr. Brooke, and the preliminaries of marriage rolled smoothly along, shortening the weeks of courtship. The betrothed bride must see her future home and dictate any changes that she would like to have made there. A woman dictates before marriage in order that she may have an appetite for submission afterwards. And certainly, the mistakes that we male and female mortals make when we have our own way might fairly raise some wonder that we are so fond of it.

On a grey but dry November morning Dorothea drove to Lowick in company with her uncle and Celia. Mr. Casaubon's home was the manor-house. Close by, visible from some parts of the garden, was the little church, with the old parsonage opposite. In the beginning of his career, Mr. Casaubon had only held the living, but the death of his brother had put him in possession of the manor also. It had a small park with a fine old oak here and there and an avenue of limes towards the south-west front, with a sunk fence between park and pleasure-ground so that from the drawing-room windows the glance swept uninterruptedly along a slope of greensward till the limes ended in a level of corn and pastures, which often seemed to melt into a lake under the setting sun. This was the happy side of the house, for the south and east looked rather melancholy even under the brightest morning. The grounds here were more confined, the flower beds showed no very careful tendance, and large clumps of trees, chiefly of sombre yews, had risen high, not ten yards from the windows. The building, of greenish stone, was in the old English style, not ugly, but small-windowed and melancholy looking: the sort of house that must have children, many flowers, open windows, and little vistas of bright things to make it seem a joyous home. In this latter end of autumn, with a sparse remnant of yellow leaves falling slowly athwart the dark evergreens in a stillness without sunshine, the house too had an air of autumnal decline, and Mr. Casaubon, when he presented himself, had no bloom that could be thrown into relief by that background.

"Oh dear!" Celia said to herself, "I am sure Freshitt Hall would have been pleasanter than this." She thought of the white freestone, the pillared portico, and the terrace full of flowers, Sir James smiling above them like a prince issuing from his enchantment in a rose-bush, with a handkerchief swiftly metamorphosed from the most delicately odorous petals—Sir James, who talked so agreeably, always about things which had common sense in them, and not about learning! Celia had those light young feminine tastes which grave and weather-worn gentlemen sometimes prefer in a wife; but happily Mr. Casaubon's bias had been different, for he would have had no chance with Celia.

Dorothea, on the contrary, found the house and grounds all that she could wish: the dark bookshelves in the long library, the carpets and curtains with colours subdued by time, the curious old maps and bird's-eye views on the walls of the corridor, with here and there an old vase below, had no oppression for her and seemed more cheerful than the casts and pictures at the Grange, which her uncle had long ago brought home from his travels—they being probably among the ideas he had taken in at one time. To poor Dorothea these severe classical nudities and smirking Renaissance-Correggiosities were painfully inexplicable, staring into the midst of her puritanic conceptions; she had never been taught how she could bring them into any sort of relevance with her life. But the owners of Lowick apparently had not been travellers, and Mr. Casaubon's studies of the past were not carried on by means of such aids.

Dorothea walked about the house with delightful emotion. Everything seemed hallowed to her; this was to be the home of her wifehood, and she looked up with eyes full of confidence to Mr. Casaubon when he drew her attention specially to some actual arrangement and asked her if she would like an alteration. All appeals to her taste she met gratefully, but saw nothing to alter. His efforts at exact courtesy and formal tenderness had no defect for her. She filled up all blanks with unmanifested perfections, interpreting him as she interpreted the works of Providence and accounting for seeming discords by her own deafness to the higher harmonies. And there are many blanks left in the weeks of courtship which a loving faith fills with happy assurance.

"Now, my dear Dorothea, I wish you to favour me by pointing out which room you would like to have as your boudoir," said Mr. Casaubon, showing that his views of the womanly nature were sufficiently large to include that requirement.

"It is very kind of you to think of that," said Dorothea, "but I assure you I would rather have all those matters decided for me. I shall be much happier to take everything as it is—just as you have been used to have it or as will yourself choose it to be. I have no motive for wishing anything else."

"Oh, Dodo," said Celia, "will you not have the bow-windowed room upstairs?"

Mr. Casaubon led the way thither. The bow-window looked down the avenue of limes; the furniture was all of a faded blue, and there were miniatures of ladies and gentlemen with powdered hair hanging in a group. A piece of tapestry over a door also showed a blue-green world with a pale stag in it. The chairs and tables were thin-legged and easy to upset. It was a room where one might fancy the ghost of a tight-laced lady revisiting the scene of her embroidery. A light bookcase contained duodecimo volumes of polite literature in calf, completing the furniture.

“Yes,” said Mr. Brooke, “this would be a pretty room with some new hangings, sofas, and that sort of thing. A little bare now.”

“No, Uncle,” said Dorothea, eagerly. “Pray do not speak of altering anything. There are so many other things in the world that want altering—I like to take these things as they are. And you like them as they are, don’t you?” she added, looking at Mr. Casaubon. “Perhaps this was your mother’s room when she was young.”

“It was,” he said with his slow bend of the head.

“This is your mother,” said Dorothea, who had turned to examine the group of miniatures. “It is like the tiny one you brought me; only, I should think a better portrait. And this one opposite, who is this?”

“Her elder sister. They were, like you and your sister, the only two children of their parents, who hang above them, you see.”

“The sister is pretty,” said Celia, implying that she thought less favourably of Mr. Casaubon’s mother. It was a new opening to Celia’s imagination, that he came of a family who had all been young in their time—the ladies wearing necklaces.

“It is a peculiar face,” said Dorothea, looking closely. “Those deep grey eyes rather near together, and the delicate, irregular nose with a sort of ripple in it, and all the powdered curls hanging backward. Altogether it seems to me peculiar rather than pretty. There is not even a family likeness between her and your mother.”

“No. And they were not alike in their lot.”

“You did not mention her to me,” said Dorothea.

“My aunt made an unfortunate marriage. I never saw her.”

Dorothea wondered a little, but felt that it would be indelicate just then to ask for any information which Mr. Casaubon did not proffer, and she turned to the window to admire the view. The sun had lately pierced the grey, and the avenue of limes cast shadows.

“Shall we not walk in the garden now?” said Dorothea.

“And you would like to see the church, you know,” said Mr. Brooke. “It is a droll little church. And the village. It all lies in a nut-shell. By the way, it will suit you, Dorothea; for the cottages are like a row of alms-houses—little gardens, gillyflowers, that sort of thing.”

“Yes, please,” said Dorothea, looking at Mr. Casaubon, “I should like to see all that.” She had got nothing from him more graphic about the Lowick cottages than that they were “not bad.”

They were soon on a gravel walk which led chiefly between grassy borders and clumps of trees, this being the nearest way to the church, Mr. Casaubon said. At the little gate leading into the churchyard there was a pause while Mr. Casaubon went to the parsonage close by to fetch a key. Celia, who had been hanging a little in the rear, came up presently when she saw that Mr. Casaubon was gone away and said in her easy staccato, which always seemed to contradict the suspicion of any malicious intent, “Do you know, Dorothea, I saw someone quite young coming up one of the walks.”

“Is that astonishing, Celia?”

“There may be a young gardener, you know—why not?” said Mr. Brooke. “I told Casaubon he should change his gardener.”

“No, not a gardener,” said Celia; “a gentleman with a sketchbook. He had light-brown curls. I only saw his back. But he was quite young.”

“The curate’s son, perhaps,” said Mr. Brooke. “Ah, there is Casaubon again, and Tucker with him. He is going to introduce Tucker. You don’t know Tucker yet.”

Mr. Tucker was the middle-aged curate, one of the “inferior clergy,” who are usually not wanting in sons. But after the introduction, the conversation did not lead to any question about his family, and the startling apparition of youthfulness was forgotten by everyone but Celia. She inwardly declined to believe that the light-brown curls and slim figure could have any relationship to Mr. Tucker, who was just as old and musty looking as she would have expected Mr. Casaubon’s curate to be; doubtless an excellent man who would go to heaven (for Celia wished not to be unprincipled), but the corners of his mouth were so unpleasant. Celia thought with some dismalness of the time she should have to spend as bridesmaid at Lowick, where the curate had probably no pretty little children whom she could like, irrespective of principle.

Mr. Tucker was invaluable in their walk; and perhaps Mr. Casaubon had not been without foresight on this head, the curate being able to answer all Dorothea’s questions about the villagers and the other parishioners. Everybody, he assured her, was well off in Lowick; not a cottager in those double cottages at a low rent but kept a pig, and the strips of garden at the back were well tended. The small boys wore excellent corduroy, the girls went out as tidy servants or did a little straw-plaiting at home: no looms here, no dissent; and though the public disposition was rather towards laying by money than towards spirituality, there was not much vice. The speckled fowls were so numerous that Mr. Brooke observed, “Your farmers leave some barley for the women to glean, I see. The poor folks here might have a fowl in their pot, as the good French king used to wish for all his people. The French eat a good many fowls—skinny fowls, you know.”

“I think it was a very cheap wish of his,” said Dorothea indignantly. “Are kings such monsters that a wish like that must be reckoned a royal virtue?”

“And if he wished them a skinny fowl,” said Celia, “that would not be nice. But perhaps he wished them to have fat fowls.”

“Yes, but the word has dropped out of the text, or perhaps was *subauditum*; that is, present in the king’s mind, but not uttered,” said Mr. Casaubon, smiling and bending his head towards Celia, who immediately dropped backward a little because she could not bear Mr. Casaubon to blink at her.

Dorothea sank into silence on the way back to the house. She felt some disappointment, of which she was yet ashamed, that there was nothing for her to do in Lowick; and in the next few minutes her mind had glanced over the possibility, which she would have preferred, of finding that her home would be in a parish which had a larger share of the world’s misery so that she might have had more active duties in it. Then, recurring to the future actually before her, she made a picture of more complete devotion to Mr. Casaubon’s aims, in which she would await new duties. Many such might reveal

themselves to the higher knowledge gained by her in that companionship.

Mr. Tucker soon left them, having some clerical work which would not allow him to lunch at the Hall; and as they were re-entering the garden through the little gate, Mr. Casaubon said, "You seem a little sad, Dorothea. I trust you are pleased with what you have seen."

"I am feeling something which is perhaps foolish and wrong," answered Dorothea with her usual openness, "almost wishing that the people wanted more to be done for them here. I have known so few ways of making my life good for anything. Of course, my notions of usefulness must be narrow. I must learn new ways of helping people."

"Doubtless," said Mr. Casaubon. "Each position has its corresponding duties. Yours, I trust, as the mistress of Lowick, will not leave any yearning unfulfilled."

"Indeed, I believe that," said Dorothea earnestly. "Do not suppose that I am sad."

"That is well. But if you are not tired, we will take another way to the house than that by which we came."

Dorothea was not at all tired, and a little circuit was made towards a fine yew-tree, the chief hereditary glory of the grounds on the side of the house. As they approached it, a figure conspicuous on a dark background of evergreens was seated on a bench sketching the old tree.

Mr. Brooke, who was walking in front with Celia, turned his head and said, "Who is that youngster, Casaubon?"

They had come very near when Mr. Casaubon answered, "That is a young relative of mine, a second cousin; the grandson, in fact," he added, looking at Dorothea, "of the lady whose portrait you have been noticing, my aunt Julia."

The young man had laid down his sketchbook and risen. His bushy light-brown curls, as well as his youthfulness, identified him at once with Celia's apparition.

"Dorothea, let me introduce to you my cousin, Mr. Ladislaw. Will, this is Miss Brooke."

The cousin was so close now that when he lifted his hat, Dorothea could see a pair of grey eyes rather near together, a delicate, irregular nose with a little ripple in it, and hair falling backward; but there was a mouth and chin of a more prominent, threatening aspect than belonged to the type of the grandmother's miniature. Young Ladislaw did not feel it necessary to smile as if he were charmed with this introduction to his future second cousin and her relatives, but wore rather a pouting air of discontent.

"You are an artist, I see," said Mr. Brooke, taking up the sketchbook and turning it over in his unceremonious fashion.

"No, I only sketch a little. There is nothing fit to be seen there," said young Ladislaw, colouring perhaps with temper rather than modesty.

"Oh, come, this is a nice bit, now. I did a little in this way myself at one time, you know. Look here, now; this is what I call a nice thing, done with what we used to call *brio*." Mr. Brooke held out towards the two girls a large coloured sketch of stony ground and trees, with a pool.

"I am no judge of these things," said Dorothea, not coldly but with an eager deprecation of the appeal to her. "You know, Uncle, I never see the beauty of those pictures which you say are so much praised. They are a language I do not understand. I suppose there is some relation between pictures and nature which I am too ignorant to feel, just as you see what a Greek sentence stands for which means nothing to me." Dorothea looked up at Mr. Casaubon, who bowed his head towards her, while Mr. Brooke said, smiling nonchalantly, "Bless me, now, how different people are! But you had a bad style of teaching, you know—else this is just the thing for girls—sketching, fine art, and so on. But you took to drawing plans; you don't understand *morbidezza*, and that kind of thing. You will come to my house, I hope, and I will show you what I did in this way," he continued, turning to young Ladislaw, who had to be recalled from his preoccupation in observing Dorothea. Ladislaw had made up his mind that she must be an unpleasant girl since she was going to marry Casaubon, and what she said of her stupidity about pictures would have confirmed that opinion even if he had believed her. As it was, he took her words for a covert judgement and was certain that she thought his sketch detestable. There was too much cleverness in her apology: she was laughing both at her uncle and himself. But what a voice! It was like the voice of a soul that had once lived in an Aeolian harp. This must be one of nature's inconsistencies. There could be no sort of passion in a girl who would marry Casaubon. But he turned from her and bowed his thanks for Mr. Brooke's invitation.

"We will turn over my Italian engravings together," continued that good-natured man. "I have no end of those things, that I have laid by for years. One gets rusty in this part of the country, you know. Not you, Casaubon; you stick to your studies; but my best ideas get undermost—out of use, you know. You clever young men must guard against indolence. I was too indolent, you know, else I might have been anywhere at one time."

"That is a seasonable admonition," said Mr. Casaubon, "but now we will pass on to the house, lest the young ladies should be tired of standing."

When their backs were turned, young Ladislaw sat down to go on with his sketching, and as he did so his face broke into an expression of amusement which increased as he went on drawing, till at last he threw back his head and laughed aloud. Partly it was the reception of his own artistic production that tickled him, partly the notion of his grave cousin as the lover of that girl, and partly Mr. Brooke's definition of the place he might have held but for the impediment of indolence. Mr. Will Ladislaw's sense of the ludicrous lit up his features very agreeably: it was the pure enjoyment of comicality and had no mixture of sneering and self-exaltation.

"What is your nephew going to do with himself, Casaubon?" said Mr. Brooke as they went on.

"My cousin, you mean, not my nephew."

"Yes, yes, cousin. But in the way of a career, you know."

"The answer to that question is painfully doubtful. On leaving Rugby he declined to go to an English university, where I would gladly have placed him, and chose what I must consider the anomalous course of studying at Heidelberg. And now he wants to go abroad again, without any special object save the vague purpose of what he calls culture, preparation for he knows not what. He declines to choose a profession."

"He has no means but what you furnish, I suppose."

"I have always given him and his friends reason to understand that I would furnish in moderation what was necessary for providing him with a scholarly education and launching him respectably. I am therefore bound to fulfil the expectation

so raised," said Mr. Casaubon, putting his conduct in the light of mere rectitude, a trait of delicacy which Dorothea had noticed with admiration.

"He has a thirst for travelling; perhaps he may turn out a Bruce or a Mungo Park," said Mr. Brooke. "I had a notion of that myself at one time."

"No, he has no bent towards exploration or the enlargement of our geognosis: that would be a special purpose which I could recognize with some approbation, though without felicitating him on a career which so often ends in premature and violent death. But so far is he from having any desire for a more accurate knowledge of the earth's surface that he said he should prefer not to know the sources of the Nile and that there should be some unknown regions preserved as hunting-grounds for the poetic imagination."

"Well, there is something in that, you know," said Mr. Brooke, who had certainly an impartial mind.

"It is, I fear, nothing more than a part of his general inaccuracy and indisposition to thoroughness of all kinds, which would be a bad augury for him in any profession, civil or sacred, even were he so far submissive to ordinary rule as to choose one."

"Perhaps he has conscientious scruples founded on his own unfitness," said Dorothea, who was interesting herself in finding a favourable explanation. "Because the law and medicine should be very serious professions to undertake, should they not? People's lives and fortunes depend on them."

"Doubtless; but I fear that my young relative Will Ladislaw is chiefly determined in his aversion to these callings by a dislike to steady application and to that kind of acquirement which is needful instrumentally but is not charming or immediately inviting to self-indulgent taste. I have insisted to him on what Aristotle has stated with admirable brevity, that for the achievement of any work regarded as an end there must be a prior exercise of many energies or acquired facilities of a secondary order, demanding patience. I have pointed to my own manuscript volumes, which represent the toil of years preparatory to a work not yet accomplished. But in vain. To careful reasoning of this kind he replies by calling himself Pegasus, and every form of prescribed work 'harness.'"

Celia laughed. She was surprised to find that Mr. Casaubon could say something quite amusing.

"Well, you know, he may turn out a Byron, a Chatterton, a Churchill—that sort of thing—there's no telling," said Mr. Brooke. "Shall you let him go to Italy or wherever else he wants to go?"

"Yes; I have agreed to furnish him with moderate supplies for a year or so; he asks no more. I shall let him be tried by the test of freedom."

"That is very kind of you," said Dorothea, looking up at Mr. Casaubon with delight. "It is noble. After all, people may really have in them some vocation which is not quite plain to themselves, may they not? They may seem idle and weak because they are growing. We should be very patient with each other, I think."

"I suppose it is being engaged to be married that has made you think patience good," said Celia as soon as she and Dorothea were alone together taking off their wrappings.

"You mean that I am very impatient, Celia."

"Yes; when people don't do and say just what you like." Celia had become less afraid of "saying things" to Dorothea since this engagement: cleverness seemed to her more pitiable than ever.

CHAPTER 10

He had catched a great cold, had he had no other clothes to wear than the skin of a bear not yet killed.
—FULLER

Young Ladislaw did not pay that visit to which Mr. Brooke had invited him, and only six days afterwards Mr. Casaubon mentioned that his young relative had started for the Continent, seeming by this cold vagueness to waive inquiry. Indeed, Will had declined to fix on any more precise destination than the entire area of Europe. Genius, he held, is necessarily intolerant of fetters: on the one hand it must have the utmost play for its spontaneity; on the other, it may confidently await those messages from the universe which summon it to its peculiar work, only placing itself in an attitude of receptivity towards all sublime chances. The attitudes of receptivity are various, and Will had sincerely tried many of them. He was not excessively fond of wine, but he had several times taken too much, simply as an experiment in that form of ecstasy; he had fasted till he was faint, and then supped on lobster; he had made himself ill with doses of opium. Nothing greatly original had resulted from these measures, and the effects of the opium had convinced him that there was an entire dissimilarity between his constitution and De Quincey's. The superadded circumstance which would evolve the genius had not yet come; the universe had not yet beckoned. Even Caesar's fortune at one time was but a grand presentiment. We know what a masquerade all development is and what effective shapes may be disguised in helpless embryos. In fact, the world is full of hopeful analogies and handsome, dubious eggs called possibilities. Will saw clearly enough the pitiable instances of long incubation producing no chick, and but for gratitude would have laughed at Casaubon, whose plodding application, rows of notebooks, and small taper of learned theory exploring the tossed ruins of the world seemed to enforce a moral entirely encouraging to Will's generous reliance on the intentions of the universe with regard to himself. He held that reliance to be a mark of genius, and certainly it is no mark to the contrary, genius consisting neither in self-conceit nor in humility, but in a power to make or do not anything in general, but something in particular. Let him start for the Continent, then, without our pronouncing on his future. Among all forms of mistake, prophecy is the most gratuitous.

But at present this caution against a too hasty judgement interests me more in relation to Mr. Casaubon than to his young cousin. If to Dorothea Mr. Casaubon had been the mere occasion which had set alight the fine inflammable material of her youthful illusions, does it follow that he was fairly represented in the minds of those less impassioned personages who have hitherto delivered their judgements concerning him? I protest against any absolute conclusion, any prejudice derived from Mrs. Cadwallader's contempt for a neighbouring clergyman's alleged greatness of soul, or Sir James Chettam's poor opinion of his rival's legs, from Mr. Brooke's failure to elicit a companion's ideas, or from Celia's criticism of a middle-aged scholar's personal appearance. I am not sure that the greatest man of his age, if ever that solitary superlative existed, could escape these unfavourable reflections of himself in various small mirrors; and even Milton, looking for his portrait in a spoon, must submit to have the facial angle of a bumpkin. Moreover, if Mr. Casaubon, speaking for himself, has rather a chilling rhetoric, it is not therefore certain that there is no good work or fine feeling in him. Did not an immortal physicist and interpreter of hieroglyphs write detestable verses? Has the theory of the solar system been advanced by graceful manners and conversational tact? Suppose we turn from outside estimates of a man to wonder, with keener interest, what is the report of his own consciousness about his doings or capacity: with what hindrances he is carrying on his daily labours; what fading of hopes or what deeper fixity of self-delusion the years are marking off within him; and with what spirit he wrestles against universal pressure, which will one day be too heavy for him and bring his heart to its final pause. Doubtless his lot is important in his own eyes; and the chief reason that we think he asks too large a place in our consideration must be our want of room for him, since we refer him to the Divine regard with perfect confidence; nay, it is even held sublime for our neighbour to expect the utmost there, however little he may have got from us. Mr. Casaubon, too, was the centre of his own world; if he was liable to think that others were providentially made for him, and especially to consider them in the light of their fitness for the author of a *Key to All Mythologies*, this trait is not quite alien to us, and like the other mendicant hopes of mortals, claims some of our pity.

Certainly this affair of his marriage with Miss Brooke touched him more nearly than it did any one of the persons who have hitherto shown their disapproval of it, and in the present stage of things I feel more tenderly towards his experience of success than towards the disappointment of the amiable Sir James. For in truth, as the day fixed for his marriage came nearer, Mr. Casaubon did not find his spirits rising; nor did the contemplation of that matrimonial garden-scene, where, as all experience showed, the path was to be bordered with flowers, prove persistently more enchanting to him than the accustomed vaults where he walked taper in hand. He did not confess to himself, still less could he have breathed to another, his surprise that though he had won a lovely and noble-hearted girl he had not won delight, which he had also regarded as an object to be found by search. It is true that he knew all the classical passages implying the contrary, but knowing classical passages, we find, is a mode of motion, which explains why they leave so little extra force for their personal application.

Poor Mr. Casaubon had imagined that his long, studious bachelorhood had stored up for him a compound interest of enjoyment and that large drafts on his affections would not fail to be honoured; for we all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors and act fatally on the strength of them. And now he was in danger of being saddened by

the very conviction that his circumstances were unusually happy: there was nothing external by which he could account for a certain blankness of sensibility which came over him just when his expectant gladness should have been most lively, just when he exchanged the accustomed dulness of his Lowick library for his visits to the Grange. Here was a weary experience in which he was as utterly condemned to loneliness as in the despair which sometimes threatened him while toiling in the morass of authorship without seeming nearer to the goal. And his was that worst loneliness which would shrink from sympathy. He could not but wish that Dorothea should think him not less happy than the world would expect her successful suitor to be; and in relation to his authorship he leaned on her young trust and veneration, he liked to draw forth her fresh interest in listening as a means of encouragement to himself: in talking to her he presented all his performance and intention with the reflected confidence of the pedagogue and rid himself for the time of that chilling ideal audience which crowded his laborious uncreative hours with the vaporous pressure of Tartarean shades.

For to Dorothea, after that toy-box history of the world adapted to young ladies which had made the chief part of her education, Mr. Casaubon's talk about his great book was full of new vistas; and this sense of revelation, this surprise of a nearer introduction to Stoics and Alexandrians as people who had ideas not totally unlike her own, kept in abeyance for the time her usual eagerness for a binding theory which could bring her own life and doctrine into strict connexion with that amazing past and give the remotest sources of knowledge some bearing on her actions. That more complete teaching would come—Mr. Casaubon would tell her all that; she was looking forward to higher initiation in ideas, as she was looking forward to marriage, and blending her dim conceptions of both. It would be a great mistake to suppose that Dorothea would have cared about any share in Mr. Casaubon's learning as mere accomplishment; for though opinion in the neighbourhood of Freshitt and Tipton had pronounced her clever, that epithet would not have described her to circles in whose more precise vocabulary cleverness implies mere aptitude for knowing and doing, apart from character. All her eagerness for acquirement lay within that full current of sympathetic motive in which her ideas and impulses were habitually swept along. She did not want to deck herself with knowledge, to wear it loose from the nerves and blood that fed her action; and if she had written a book she must have done it as Saint Theresa did, under the command of an authority that constrained her conscience. But something she yearned for by which her life might be filled with action at once rational and ardent; and since the time was gone by for guiding visions and spiritual directors, since prayer heightened yearning but not instruction, what lamp was there but knowledge? Surely learned men kept the only oil, and who more learned than Mr. Casaubon?

Thus in these brief weeks Dorothea's joyous, grateful expectation was unbroken, and however her lover might occasionally be conscious of flatness, he could never refer it to any slackening of her affectionate interest.

The season was mild enough to encourage the project of extending the wedding journey as far as Rome, and Mr. Casaubon was anxious for this because he wished to inspect some manuscripts in the Vatican.

"I still regret that your sister is not to accompany us," he said one morning, some time after it had been ascertained that Celia objected to go and that Dorothea did not wish for her companionship. "You will have many lonely hours, Dorothea, for I shall be constrained to make the utmost use of my time during our stay in Rome, and I should feel more at liberty if you had a companion."

The words "I should feel more at liberty" grated on Dorothea. For the first time in speaking to Mr. Casaubon she coloured from annoyance.

"You must have misunderstood me very much," she said, "if you think I should not enter into the value of your time, if you think that I should not willingly give up whatever interfered with your using it to the best purpose."

"That is very amiable in you, my dear Dorothea," said Mr. Casaubon, not in the least noticing that she was hurt; "but if you had a lady as your companion, I could put you both under the care of a cicerone, and we could thus achieve two purposes in the same space of time."

"I beg you will not refer to this again," said Dorothea rather haughtily. But immediately she feared that she was wrong, and turning towards him she laid her hand on his, adding in a different tone, "Pray do not be anxious about me. I shall have so much to think of when I am alone. And Tantripp will be a sufficient companion, just to take care of me. I could not bear to have Celia; she would be miserable."

It was time to dress. There was to be a dinner-party that day, the last of the parties which were held at the Grange as proper preliminaries to the wedding, and Dorothea was glad of a reason for moving away at once on the sound of the bell, as if she needed more than her usual amount of preparation. She was ashamed of being irritated from some cause she could not define even to herself; for though she had no intention to be untruthful, her reply had not touched the real hurt within her. Mr. Casaubon's words had been quite reasonable, yet they had brought a vague instantaneous sense of aloofness on his part.

"Surely I am in a strangely selfish, weak state of mind," she said to herself. "How can I have a husband who is so much above me without knowing that he needs me less than I need him?"

Having convinced herself that Mr. Casaubon was altogether right, she recovered her equanimity and was an agreeable image of serene dignity when she came into the drawing-room in her silver-grey dress—the simple lines of her dark-brown hair parted over her brow and coiled massively behind, in keeping with the entire absence from her manner and expression of all search after mere effect. Sometimes when Dorothea was in company, there seemed to be as complete an air of repose about her as if she had been a picture of Santa Barbara looking out from her tower into the clear air; but these intervals of quietude made the energy of her speech and emotion the more remarked when some outward appeal had touched her.

She was naturally the subject of many observations this evening, for the dinner-party was large and rather more miscellaneous as to the male portion than any which had been held at the Grange since Mr. Brooke's nieces had resided with him, so that the talking was done in duos and trios more or less inharmonious. There was the newly elected mayor of Middlemarch, who happened to be a manufacturer; the philanthropic banker, his brother-in-law, who predominated so much in the town that some called him a Methodist, others a hypocrite, according to the resources of their vocabulary; and there were various professional men. In fact, Mrs. Cadwallader said that Brooke was beginning to treat the Middlemarchers and that she preferred the farmers at the tithe-dinner, who drank her health unpretentiously and were not ashamed of their

grandfathers' furniture. For in that part of the country, before Reform had done its notable part in developing the political consciousness, there was a clearer distinction of ranks and a dimmer distinction of parties so that Mr. Brooke's miscellaneous invitations seemed to belong to that general laxity which came from his inordinate travel and habit of taking too much in the form of ideas.

Already, as Miss Brooke passed out of the dining-room, opportunity was found for some interjectional "asides."

"A fine woman, Miss Brooke! An uncommonly fine woman, by God!" said Mr. Standish, the old lawyer, who had been so long concerned with the landed gentry that he had become landed himself and used that oath in a deep-mouthed manner as a sort of armorial bearings, stamping the speech of a man who held a good position.

Mr. Bulstrode, the banker, seemed to be addressed, but that gentleman disliked coarseness and profanity and merely bowed. The remark was taken up by Mr. Chichely, a middle-aged bachelor and coursing celebrity who had a complexion something like an Easter egg, a few hairs carefully arranged, and a carriage implying the consciousness of a distinguished appearance.

"Yes, but not my style of woman; I like a woman who lays herself out a little more to please us. There should be a little filigree about a woman, something of the coquette. A man likes a sort of challenge. The more of a dead set she makes at you the better."

"There's some truth in that," said Mr. Standish, disposed to be genial. "And, by God, it's usually the way with them. I suppose it answers some wise ends: Providence made them so, eh, Bulstrode?"

"I should be disposed to refer coquetry to another source," said Mr. Bulstrode. "I should rather refer it to the Devil."

"Ay, to be sure, there should be a little devil in a woman," said Mr. Chichely, whose study of the fair sex seemed to have been detrimental to his theology. "And I like them blond, with a certain gait and a swan neck. Between ourselves, the mayor's daughter is more to my taste than Miss Brooke or Miss Celia either. If I were a marrying man I should choose Miss Vincy before either of them."

"Well, make up, make up," said Mr. Standish jocosely; "you see the middle-aged fellows carry the day."

Mr. Chichely shook his head with much meaning; he was not going to incur the certainty of being accepted by the woman he would choose.

The Miss Vincy who had the honour of being Mr. Chichely's ideal was of course not present; for Mr. Brooke, always objecting to go too far, would not have chosen that his nieces should meet the daughter of a Middlemarch manufacturer unless it were on a public occasion. The feminine part of the company included none whom Lady Chettam or Mrs. Cadwallader could object to; for Mrs. Renfrew, the colonel's widow, was not only unexceptionable in point of breeding, but also interesting on the ground of her complaint, which puzzled the doctors and seemed clearly a case wherein the fulness of professional knowledge might need the supplement of quackery. Lady Chettam, who attributed her own remarkable health to home-made bitters united with constant medical attendance, entered with much exercise of the imagination into Mrs. Renfrew's account of symptoms and into the amazing futility in her case of all strengthening medicines.

"Where can all the strength of those medicines go, my dear?" said the mild but stately dowager, turning to Mrs. Cadwallader reflectively when Mrs. Renfrew's attention was called away.

"It strengthens the disease," said the rector's wife, much too well-born not to be an amateur in medicine. "Everything depends on the constitution; some people make fat, some blood, and some bile—that's my view of the matter; and whatever they take is a sort of grist to the mill."

"Then she ought to take medicines that would reduce—reduce the disease, you know, if you are right, my dear. And I think what you say is reasonable."

"Certainly it is reasonable. You have two sorts of potatoes, fed on the same soil. One of them grows more and more watery—"

"Ah! like this poor Mrs. Renfrew—that is what I think. Dropsy! There is no swelling yet—it is inward. I should say she ought to take drying medicines, shouldn't you? Or a dry, hot-air bath. Many things might be tried of a drying nature."

"Let her try a certain person's pamphlets," said Mrs. Cadwallader in an undertone, seeing the gentlemen enter. "*He* does not want drying."

"Who, my dear?" said Lady Chettam, a charming woman, not so quick as to nullify the pleasure of explanation.

"The bridegroom—Casaubon. He has certainly been drying up faster since the engagement; the flame of passion, I suppose."

"I should think he is far from having a good constitution," said Lady Chettam with a still deeper undertone. "And then his studies—so very dry, as you say."

"Really, by the side of Sir James, he looks like a death's head skinned over for the occasion. Mark my words: in a year from this time that girl will hate him. She looks up to him as an oracle now, and by and by she will be at the other extreme. All flightiness!"

"How very shocking! I fear she is headstrong. But tell me—you know all about him—is there anything very bad? What is the truth?"

"The truth? He is as bad as the wrong physic, nasty to take and sure to disagree."

"There could not be anything worse than that," said Lady Chettam with so vivid a conception of the physic that she seemed to have learned something exact about Mr. Casaubon's disadvantages. "However, James will hear nothing against Miss Brooke. He says she is the mirror of women still."

"That is a generous make-believe of his. Depend upon it, he likes little Celia better, and she appreciates him. I hope you like my little Celia?"

"Certainly; she is fonder of geraniums and seems more docile, though not so fine a figure. But we were talking of physic: tell me about this new young surgeon, Mr. Lydgate. I am told he is wonderfully clever; he certainly looks it—a fine brow indeed."

"He is a gentleman. I heard him talking to Humphrey. He talks well."

"Yes. Mr. Brooke says he is one of the Lydgates of Northumberland, really well connected. One does not expect it in a

practitioner of that kind. For my own part, I like a medical man more on a footing with the servants; they are often all the cleverer. I assure you I found poor Hicks's judgement unfailing; I never knew him wrong. He was coarse and butcher-like, but he knew my constitution. It was a loss to me his going off so suddenly. Dear me, what a very animated conversation Miss Brooke seems to be having with this Mr. Lydgate!"

"She is talking cottages and hospitals with him," said Mrs. Cadwallader, whose ears and power of interpretation were quick. "I believe he is a sort of philanthropist, so Brooke is sure to take him up."

"James," said Lady Chettam when her son came near, "bring Mr. Lydgate and introduce him to me. I want to test him."

The affable dowager declared herself delighted with this opportunity of making Mr. Lydgate's acquaintance, having heard of his success in treating fever on a new plan.

Mr. Lydgate had the medical accomplishment of looking perfectly grave whatever nonsense was talked to him, and his dark, steady eyes gave him impressiveness as a listener. He was as little as possible like the lamented Hicks, especially in a certain careless refinement about his toilette and utterance. Yet Lady Chettam gathered much confidence in him. He confirmed her view of her own constitution as being peculiar by admitting that all constitutions might be called peculiar, and he did not deny that hers might be more peculiar than others. He did not approve of a too lowering system, including reckless cupping, nor, on the other hand, of incessant port wine and bark. He said "I think so" with an air of so much deference accompanying the insight of agreement that she formed the most cordial opinion of his talents.

"I am quite pleased with your *protégé*," she said to Mr. Brooke before going away.

"My *protégé*? Dear me! Who is that?" said Mr. Brooke.

"This young Lydgate, the new doctor. He seems to me to understand his profession admirably."

"Oh, Lydgate! He is not my *protégé*, you know; only I knew an uncle of his who sent me a letter about him. However, I think he is likely to be first-rate—has studied in Paris, knew Broussais; has ideas, you know—wants to raise the profession."

"Lydgate has lots of ideas, quite new, about ventilation and diet, that sort of thing," resumed Mr. Brooke after he had handed out Lady Chettam and had returned to be civil to a group of Middlemarchers.

"Hang it, do you think that is quite sound—upsetting the old treatment, which has made Englishmen what they are?" said Mr. Standish.

"Medical knowledge is at a low ebb among us," said Mr. Bulstrode, who spoke in a subdued tone and had rather a sickly air. "I, for my part, hail the advent of Mr. Lydgate. I hope to find good reason for confiding the new hospital to his management."

"That is all very fine," replied Mr. Standish, who was not fond of Mr. Bulstrode; "if you like him to try experiments on your hospital patients and kill a few people for charity, I have no objection. But I am not going to hand money out of my purse to have experiments tried on me. I like treatment that has been tested a little."

"Well, you know, Standish, every dose you take is an experiment—an experiment, you know," said Mr. Brooke, nodding towards the lawyer.

"Oh, if you talk in that sense!" said Mr. Standish with as much disgust at such non-legal quibbling as a man can well betray towards a valuable client.

"I should be glad of any treatment that would cure me without reducing me to a skeleton like poor Grainger," said Mr. Vincy, the mayor, a florid man who would have served for a study of flesh in striking contrast with the Franciscan tints of Mr. Bulstrode. "It's an uncommonly dangerous thing to be left without any padding against the shafts of disease, as somebody said, and I think it a very good expression myself."

Mr. Lydgate, of course, was out of hearing. He had quitted the party early and would have thought it altogether tedious but for the novelty of certain introductions, especially the introduction to Miss Brooke, whose youthful bloom, with her approaching marriage to that faded scholar and her interest in matters socially useful, gave her the piquancy of an unusual combination.

"She is a good creature—that fine girl—but a little too earnest," he thought. "It is troublesome to talk to such women. They are always wanting reasons, yet they are too ignorant to understand the merits of any question and usually fall back on their moral sense to settle things after their own taste."

Evidently Miss Brooke was not Mr. Lydgate's style of woman any more than Mr. Chichely's. Considered, indeed, in relation to the latter, whose mind was matured, she was altogether a mistake, and calculated to shock his trust in final causes, including the adaptation of fine young women to purple-faced bachelors. But Lydgate was less ripe and might possibly have experience before him which would modify his opinion as to the most excellent things in woman.

Miss Brooke, however, was not again seen by either of these gentlemen under her maiden name. Not long after that dinner-party she had become Mrs. Casaubon and was on her way to Rome.

CHAPTER 11

> But deeds and language such as men do use,
> And persons such as comedy would choose,
> When she would show an image of the times,
> And sport with human follies, not with crimes.
>
> —BEN JONSON

Lydgate, in fact, was already conscious of being fascinated by a woman strikingly different from Miss Brooke; he did not in the least suppose that he had lost his balance and fallen in love, but he had said of that particular woman, “She is grace itself; she is perfectly lovely and accomplished. That is what a woman ought to be: she ought to produce the effect of exquisite music.” Plain women he regarded as he did the other severe facts of life, to be faced with philosophy and investigated by science. But Rosamond Vincy seemed to have the true melodic charm; and when a man has seen the woman whom he would have chosen if he had intended to marry speedily, his remaining a bachelor will usually depend on her resolution rather than on his. Lydgate believed that he should not marry for several years, not marry until he had trodden out a good clear path for himself away from the broad road which was quite ready made. He had seen Miss Vincy above his horizon almost as long as it had taken Mr. Casaubon to become engaged and married, but this learned gentleman was possessed of a fortune; he had assembled his voluminous notes and had made that sort of reputation which precedes performance—often the larger part of a man’s fame. He took a wife, as we have seen, to adorn the remaining quadrant of his course and be a little moon that would cause hardly a calculable perturbation. But Lydgate was young, poor, ambitious. He had his half-century before him instead of behind him, and he had come to Middlemarch bent on doing many things that were not directly fitted to make his fortune or even secure him a good income. To a man under such circumstances, taking a wife is something more than a question of adornment, however highly he may rate this; and Lydgate was disposed to give it the first place among wifely functions. To his taste, guided by a single conversation, here was the point on which Miss Brooke would be found wanting, notwithstanding her undeniable beauty. She did not look at things from the proper feminine angle. The society of such women was about as relaxing as going from your work to teach the second form instead of reclining in a paradise with sweet laughs for bird-notes and blue eyes for a heaven.

Certainly nothing at present could seem much less important to Lydgate than the turn of Miss Brooke’s mind, or to Miss Brooke than the qualities of the woman who had attracted this young surgeon. But anyone watching keenly the stealthy convergence of human lots sees a slow preparation of effects from one life on another which tells like a calculated irony on the indifference of the frozen stare with which we look at our unintroduced neighbour. Destiny stands by sarcastic with our *dramatis personae* folded in her hand.

Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement, had not only its striking downfalls, its brilliant young professional dandies who ended by living up an entry with a drab and six children for their establishment, but also those less marked vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse and begetting new consciousness of interdependence. Some slipped a little downward, some got higher footing: people denied aspirates, gained wealth, and fastidious gentlemen stood for boroughs; some were caught in political currents, some in ecclesiastical, and perhaps found themselves surprisingly grouped in consequence; while a few personages of families that stood with rocky firmness amid all this fluctuation were slowly presenting new aspects in spite of solidity and altering with the double change of self and beholder. Municipal town and rural parish gradually made fresh threads of connexion—gradually, as the old stocking gave way to the savings-bank and the worship of the solar guinea became extinct, while squires and baronets and even lords who had once lived blamelessly afar from the civic mind gathered the faultiness of closer acquaintanceship. Settlers, too, came from distant counties, some with an alarming novelty of skill, others with an offensive advantage in cunning. In fact, much the same sort of movement and mixture went on in old England as we find in older Herodotus, who also, in telling what had been, thought it well to take a woman’s lot for his starting point; though Io, as a maiden apparently beguiled by attractive merchandise, was the reverse of Miss Brooke, and in this respect perhaps bore more resemblance to Rosamond Vincy, who had excellent taste in costume, with that nymph-like figure and pure blondness which give the largest range to choice in the flow and colour of drapery. But these things made only part of her charm. She was admitted to be the flower of Mrs. Lemon’s school, the chief school in the county, where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female—even to extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage. Mrs. Lemon herself had always held up Miss Vincy as an example: no pupil, she said, exceeded that young lady for mental acquisition and propriety of speech, while her musical execution was quite exceptional. We cannot help the way in which people speak of us, and probably if Mrs. Lemon had undertaken to describe Juliet or Imogen, these heroines would not have seemed poetical. The first vision of Rosamond would have been enough with most judges to dispel any prejudice excited by Mrs. Lemon’s praise.

Lydgate could not be long in Middlemarch without having that agreeable vision or even without making the acquaintance of the Vincy family; for though Mr. Peacock, whose practice he had paid something to enter on, had not been their doctor (Mrs. Vincy not liking the lowering system adopted by him), he had many patients among their connexions and acquaintances. For who of any consequence in Middlemarch was not connected or at least acquainted with the Vincys? They were old manufacturers and had kept a good house for three generations, in which there had naturally been much

intermarrying with neighbours more or less decidedly genteel. Mr. Vincy's sister had made a wealthy match in accepting Mr. Bulstrode, who, however, as a man not born in the town and altogether of dimly known origin, was considered to have done well in uniting himself with a real Middlemarch family; on the other hand, Mr. Vincy had descended a little, having taken an innkeeper's daughter. But on this side too there was a cheering sense of money, for Mrs. Vincy's sister had been second wife to rich old Mr. Featherstone and had died childless years ago so that her nephews and nieces might be supposed to touch the affections of the widower. And it happened that Mr. Bulstrode and Mr. Featherstone, two of Peacock's most important patients, had, from different causes, given an especially good reception to his successor, who had raised some partisanship as well as discussion. Mr. Wrench, medical attendant to the Vincy family, very early had grounds for thinking lightly of Lydgate's professional discretion, and there was no report about him which was not retailed at the Vincys', where visitors were frequent. Mr. Vincy was more inclined to general good fellowship than to taking sides, but there was no need for him to be hasty in making any new man's acquaintance. Rosamond silently wished that her father would invite Mr. Lydgate. She was tired of the faces and figures she had always been used to, the various irregular profiles and gaits and turns of phrase distinguishing those Middlemarch young men whom she had known as boys. She had been at school with girls of higher position, whose brothers, she felt sure, it would have been possible for her to be more interested in than in these inevitable Middlemarch companions. But she would not have chosen to mention her wish to her father; and he, for his part, was in no hurry on the subject. An alderman about to be mayor must by and by enlarge his dinner-parties, but at present there were plenty of guests at his well-spread table.

That table often remained covered with the relics of the family breakfast long after Mr. Vincy had gone with his second son to the warehouse and when Miss Morgan was already far on in morning lessons with the younger girls in the schoolroom. It awaited the family laggard, who found any sort of inconvenience (to others) less disagreeable than getting up when he was called. This was the case one morning of the October in which we have lately seen Mr. Casaubon visiting the Grange; and though the room was a little over-heated with the fire, which had sent the spaniel panting to a remote corner, Rosamond, for some reason, continued to sit at her embroidery longer than usual, now and then giving herself a little shake and laying her work on her knee to contemplate it with an air of hesitating weariness. Her mamma, who had returned from an excursion to the kitchen, sat on the other side of the small work-table with an air of more entire placidity until, the clock again giving notice that it was going to strike, she looked up from the lace mending which was occupying her plump fingers and rang the bell.

"Knock at Mr. Fred's door again, Pritchard, and tell him it has struck half-past ten."

This was said without any change in the radiant good humour of Mrs. Vincy's face, in which forty-five years had delved neither angles nor parallels; and pushing back her pink cap-strings, she let her work rest on her lap while she looked admiringly at her daughter.

"Mamma," said Rosamond, "when Fred comes down I wish you would not let him have red herrings. I cannot bear the smell of them all over the house at this hour of the morning."

"Oh, my dear, you are so hard on your brothers! It is the only fault I have to find with you. You are the sweetest temper in the world, but you are so tetchy with your brothers."

"Not tetchy, Mamma; you never hear me speak in an unladylike way."

"Well, but you want to deny them things."

"Brothers are so unpleasant."

"Oh, my dear, you must allow for young men. Be thankful if they have good hearts. A woman must learn to put up with little things. You will be married some day."

"Not to anyone who is like Fred."

"Don't decry your own brother, my dear. Few young men have less against them, although he couldn't take his degree—I'm sure I can't understand why, for he seems to me most clever. And you know yourself he was thought equal to the best society at college. So particular as you are, my dear, I wonder you are not glad to have such a gentlemanly young man for a brother. You are always finding fault with Bob because he is not Fred."

"Oh no, Mamma, only because he is Bob."

"Well, my dear, you will not find any Middlemarch young man who has not something against him."

"But—" Here Rosamond's face broke into a smile which suddenly revealed two dimples. She herself thought unfavourably of these dimples and smiled little in general society. "But I shall not marry any Middlemarch young man."

"So it seems, my love, for you have as good as refused the pick of them; and if there's better to be had, I'm sure there's no girl better deserves it."

"Excuse me, Mamma—I wish you would not say, 'the pick of them.'"

"Why, what else are they?"

"I mean, Mamma, it is rather a vulgar expression."

"Very likely, my dear; I never was a good speaker. What should I say?"

"The best of them."

"Why, that seems just as plain and common. If I had had time to think, I should have said, 'the most superior young men.' But with your education you must know."

"What must Rosy know, Mother?" said Mr. Fred, who had slid in unobserved through the half-open door while the ladies were bending over their work, and now going up to the fire stood with his back towards it, warming the soles of his slippers.

"Whether it's right to say 'superior young men,'" said Mrs. Vincy, ringing the bell.

"Oh, there are so many superior teas and sugars now. Superior is getting to be shopkeepers' slang."

"Are you beginning to dislike slang, then?" said Rosamond with mild gravity.

"Only the wrong sort. All choice of words is slang. It marks a class."

"There is correct English; that is not slang."

"I beg your pardon; correct English is the slang of prigs who write history and essays. And the strongest slang of all is

the slang of poets."

"You will say anything, Fred, to gain your point."

"Well, tell me whether it is a slang or poetry to call an ox a leg-plaiter."

"Of course you can call it poetry if you like."

"Aha, Miss Rosy, you don't know Homer from slang. I shall invent a new game; I shall write bits of slang and poetry on slips and give them to you to separate."

"Dear me, how amusing it is to hear young people talk!" said Mrs. Vincy with cheerful admiration.

"Have you got nothing else for my breakfast, Pritchard?" said Fred to the servant who brought in coffee and buttered toast, while he walked around the table surveying the ham, potted beef, and other cold remnants with an air of silent rejection and polite forbearance from signs of disgust.

"Should you like eggs, sir?"

"Eggs, no! Bring me a grilled bone."

"Really, Fred," said Rosamond when the servant had left the room, "if you must have hot things for breakfast, I wish you would come down earlier. You can get up at six o'clock to go out hunting; I cannot understand why you find it so difficult to get up on other mornings."

"That is your want of understanding, Rosy. I can get up to go hunting because I like it."

"What would you think of me if I came down two hours after everyone else and ordered grilled bone?"

"I should think you were an uncommonly fast young lady," said Fred, eating his toast with the utmost composure.

"I cannot see why brothers are to make themselves disagreeable any more than sisters."

"I don't make myself disagreeable; it is you who find me so. Disagreeable is a word that describes your feelings and not my actions."

"I think it describes the smell of grilled bone."

"Not at all. It describes a sensation in your little nose associated with certain finicking notions which are the classics of Mrs. Lemon's school. Look at my mother: you don't see her objecting to everything except what she does herself. She is my notion of a pleasant woman."

"Bless you both, my dears, and don't quarrel," said Mrs. Vincy with motherly cordiality. "Come, Fred, tell us all about the new doctor. How is your uncle pleased with him?"

"Pretty well, I think. He asks Lydgate all sorts of questions and then screws up his face while he hears the answers, as if they were pinching his toes. That's his way. Ah, here comes my grilled bone."

"But how came you to stay out so late, my dear? You only said you were going to your uncle's."

"Oh, I dined at Plymdale's. We had whist. Lydgate was there too."

"And what do you think of him? He is very gentlemanly, I suppose. They say he is of excellent family—his relations quite county people."

"Yes," said Fred. "There was a Lydgate at John's who spent no end of money. I find this man is a second cousin of his. But rich men may have very poor devils for second cousins."

"It always makes a difference, though, to be of good family," said Rosamond with a tone of decision which showed that she had thought on this subject. Rosamond felt that she might have been happier if she had not been the daughter of a Middlemarch manufacturer. She disliked anything which reminded her that her mother's father had been an innkeeper. Certainly anyone remembering the fact might think that Mrs. Vincy had the air of a very handsome, good-humoured landlady, accustomed to the most capricious orders of gentlemen.

"I thought it was odd his name was Tertius," said the bright-faced matron, "but of course it's a name in the family. But now, tell us exactly what sort of man he is."

"Oh, tallish, dark, clever—talks well—rather a prig, I think."

"I never can make out what you mean by a prig," said Rosamond.

"A fellow who wants to show that he has opinions."

"Why, my dear, doctors must have opinions," said Mrs. Vincy. "What are they there for else?"

"Yes, Mother, the opinions they are paid for. But a prig is a fellow who is always making you a present of his opinions."

"I suppose Mary Garth admires Mr. Lydgate," said Rosamond, not without a touch of innuendo.

"Really, I can't say," said Fred rather glumly as he left the table, and taking up a novel which he had brought down with him, threw himself into an arm-chair. "If you are jealous of her, go oftener to Stone Court yourself and eclipse her."

"I wish you would not be so vulgar, Fred. If you have finished, pray ring the bell."

"It is true, though—what your brother says, Rosamond," Mrs. Vincy began when the servant had cleared the table. "It is a thousand pities you haven't patience to go and see your uncle more, so proud of you as he is, and wanted you to live with him. There's no knowing what he might have done for you as well as for Fred. God knows, I'm fond of having you at home with me, but I can part with my children for their good. And now it stands to reason that your uncle Featherstone will do something for Mary Garth."

"Mary Garth can bear being at Stone Court because she likes that better than being a governess," said Rosamond, folding up her work. "I would rather not have anything left to me if I must earn it by enduring much of my uncle's cough and his ugly relations."

"He can't be long for this world, my dear; I wouldn't hasten his end, but what with asthma and that inward complaint, let us hope there is something better for him in another. And I have no ill will towards Mary Garth, but there's justice to be thought of. And Mr. Featherstone's first wife brought him no money, as my sister did. Her niece and nephews can't have so much claim as my sister's. And I must say I think Mary Garth a dreadful plain girl—more fit for a governess."

"Everyone would not agree with you there, Mother," said Fred, who seemed to be able to read and listen too.

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Vincy, wheeling skilfully, "if she *had* some fortune left her—a man marries his wife's relations, and the Garths are so poor and live in such a small way. But I shall leave you to your studies, my dear, for I must go and do some shopping."

“Fred’s studies are not very deep,” said Rosamond, rising with her mamma; “he is only reading a novel.”

“Well, well, by and by he’ll go to his Latin and things,” said Mrs. Vincy soothingly, stroking her son’s head. “There’s a fire in the smoking-room on purpose. It’s your father’s wish, you know—Fred, my dear—and I always tell him you will be good and go to college again to take your degree.”

Fred drew his mother’s hand down to his lips, but said nothing.

“I suppose you are not going out riding today?” said Rosamond, lingering a little after her mamma was gone.

“No, why?”

“Papa says I may have the chestnut to ride now.”

“You can go with me tomorrow if you like. Only I am going to Stone Court, remember.”

“I want the ride so much, it is indifferent to me where we go.” Rosamond really wished to go to Stone Court, of all other places.

“Oh, I say, Rosy,” said Fred as she was passing out of the room, “if you are going to the piano, let me come and play some airs with you.”

“Pray do not ask me this morning.”

“Why not this morning?”

“Really, Fred, I wish you would leave off playing the flute. A man looks very silly playing the flute. And you play so out of tune.”

“When next anyone makes love to you, Miss Rosamond, I will tell him how obliging you are.”

“Why should you expect me to oblige you by hearing you play the flute any more than I should expect you to oblige me by not playing it?”

“And why should you expect me to take you out riding?”

This question led to an adjustment, for Rosamond had set her mind on that particular ride.

So Fred was gratified with nearly an hour’s practice of “Ar hyd y nos,” “Ye banks and braes,” and other favourite airs from his *Instructor on the Flute*; a wheezy performance, into which he threw much ambition and an irrepressible hopefulness.

CHAPTER 12

He had more tow on his distaff
Than Gerveis knew.

—CHAUCER

The ride to Stone Court, which Fred and Rosamond took the next morning, lay through a pretty bit of midland landscape, almost all meadows and pastures, with hedgerows still allowed to grow in bushy beauty and to spread out coral fruit for the birds. Little details gave each field a particular physiognomy dear to the eyes that have looked on them from childhood: the pool in the corner where the grasses were dank and trees leaned whisperingly; the great oak shadowing a bare place in mid-pasture; the high bank where the ash-trees grew; the sudden slope of the old marl-pit making a red background for the burdock; the huddled roofs and ricks of the homestead without a traceable way of approach; the grey gate and fences against the depths of the bordering wood; and the stray hovel, its old, old thatch full of mossy hills and valleys with wondrous modulations of light and shadow such as we travel far to see in later life, and see larger, but not more beautiful. These are the things that make the gamut of joy in landscape to midland-bred souls—the things they toddled among or perhaps learned by heart standing between their father's knees while he drove leisurely.

But the road, even the byroad, was excellent; for Lowick, as we have seen, was not a parish of muddy lanes and poor tenants; and it was into Lowick parish that Fred and Rosamond entered after a couple of miles' riding. Another mile would bring them to Stone Court, and at the end of the first half, the house was already visible, looking as if it had been arrested in its growth towards a stone mansion by an unexpected budding of farm-buildings on its left flank, which had hindered it from becoming anything more than the substantial dwelling of a gentleman farmer. It was not the less agreeable an object in the distance for the cluster of pinnacled corn-ricks which balanced the fine row of walnuts on the right.

Presently it was possible to discern something that might be a gig on the circular drive before the front door.

"Dear me," said Rosamond, "I hope none of my uncle's horrible relations are there."

"They are, though. That is Mrs. Waule's gig—the last yellow gig left, I should think. When I see Mrs. Waule in it, I understand how yellow can have been worn for mourning. That gig seems to me more funereal than a hearse. But then Mrs. Waule always has black crape on. How does she manage it, Rosy? Her friends can't always be dying."

"I don't know at all. And she is not in the least evangelical," said Rosamond reflectively as if that religious point of view would have fully accounted for perpetual crape. "And not poor," she added after a moment's pause.

"No, by George! They are as rich as Jews, those Waules and Featherstones; I mean for people like them, who don't want to spend anything. And yet they hang about my uncle like vultures and are afraid of a farthing going away from their side of the family. But I believe he hates them all."

The Mrs. Waule who was so far from being admirable in the eyes of these distant connexions had happened to say this very morning (not at all with a defiant air, but in a low, muffled, neutral tone, as of a voice heard through cotton wool) that she did not wish "to enjoy their good opinion." She was seated, as she observed, on her own brother's hearth and had been Jane Featherstone five-and-twenty years before she had been Jane Waule, which entitled her to speak when her own brother's name had been made free with by those who had no right to it.

"What are you driving at there?" said Mr. Featherstone, holding his stick between his knees and settling his wig while he gave her a momentary sharp glance which seemed to react on him like a draught of cold air and set him coughing.

Mrs. Waule had to defer her answer till he was quiet again, till Mary Garth had supplied him with fresh syrup and he had begun to rub the gold knob of his stick, looking bitterly at the fire. It was a bright fire, but it made no difference to the chill-looking purplish tint of Mrs. Waule's face, which was as neutral as her voice, having mere chinks for eyes, and lips that hardly moved in speaking.

"The doctors can't master that cough, Brother. It's just like what I have; for I'm your own sister, constitution and everything. But as I was saying, it's a pity Mrs. Vincy's family can't be better conducted."

"Tchah! You said nothing o' the sort. You said somebody had made free with my name."

"And no more than can be proved, if what everybody says is true. My brother Solomon tells me it's the talk up and down in Middlemarch how unsteady young Vincy is, and has been forever gambling at billiards since home he came."

"Nonsense! What's a game at billiards? It's a good gentlemanly game, and young Vincy is not a clodhopper. If your son John took to billiards, now, he'd make a fool of himself."

"Your nephew John never took to billiards or any other game, Brother, and is far from losing hundreds of pounds, which, if what everybody says is true, must be found somewhere else than out of Mr. Vincy the father's pocket. For they say he's been losing money for years, though nobody would think so to see him go coursing and keeping open house as they do. And I've heard say Mr. Bulstrode condemns Mrs. Vincy beyond anything for her flightiness and spoiling her children so."

"What's Bulstrode to me? I don't bank with him."

"Well, Mrs. Bulstrode is Mr. Vincy's own sister, and they do say that Mr. Vincy mostly trades on the bank money; and you may see yourself, Brother, when a woman past forty has pink strings always flying and that light way of laughing at everything, it's very unbecoming. But indulging your children is one thing, and finding money to pay their debts is another.

And it's openly said that young Vincy has raised money on his expectations. I don't say what expectations. Miss Garth hears me and is welcome to tell again. I know young people hang together."

"No, thank you, Mrs. Waule," said Mary Garth. "I dislike hearing scandal too much to wish to repeat it."

Mr. Featherstone rubbed the knob of his stick and made a brief, convulsive show of laughter, which had much the same genuineness as an old whist-player's chuckle over a bad hand. Still looking at the fire, he said, "And who pretends to say Fred Vincy hasn't got expectations? Such a fine, spirited fellow is like enough to have 'em."

There was a slight pause before Mrs. Waule replied, and when she did so, her voice seemed to be slightly moistened with tears, though her face was still dry.

"Whether or no, Brother, it is naturally painful to me and my brother Solomon to hear your name made free with, and your complaint being such as may carry you off sudden, and people who are no more Featherstones than the Merry-Andrew at the fair openly reckoning on your property coming to *them*. And me your own sister, and Solomon your own brother! And if that's to be it, what has it pleased the Almighty to make families for?" Here Mrs. Waule's tears fell, but with moderation.

"Come, out with it, Jane!" said Mr. Featherstone, looking at her. "You mean to say, Fred Vincy has been getting somebody to advance him money on what he says he knows about my will, eh?"

"I never said so, Brother." (Mrs. Waule's voice had again become dry and unshaken.) "It was told me by my brother Solomon last night when he called coming from market to give me advice about the old wheat, me being a widow and my son John only three-and-twenty, though steady beyond anything. And he had it from most undeniable authority, and not one, but many."

"Stuff and nonsense! I don't believe a word of it. It's all a got-up story. Go to the window, Missy; I thought I heard a horse. See if the doctor's coming."

"Not got up by me, Brother, nor yet by Solomon, who, whatever else he may be—and I don't deny he has oddities—has made his will and parted his property equal between such kin as he's friends with; though for my part, I think there are times when some should be considered more than others. But Solomon makes it no secret what he means to do."

"The more fool he!" said Mr. Featherstone with some difficulty, breaking into a severe fit of coughing that required Mary Garth to stand near him, so that she did not find out whose horses they were which presently paused stamping on the gravel before the door.

Before Mr. Featherstone's cough was quiet, Rosamond entered, bearing up her riding-habit with much grace. She bowed ceremoniously to Mrs. Waule, who said stiffly, "How do you do, Miss?" smiled and nodded silently to Mary, and remained standing till the coughing should cease and allow her uncle to notice her.

"Heyday, Miss," he said at last; "you have a fine colour. Where's Fred?"

"Seeing about the horses. He will be in presently."

"Sit down, sit down. Mrs. Waule, you'd better go."

Even those neighbours who had called Peter Featherstone an old fox had never accused him of being insincerely polite, and his sister was quite used to the peculiar absence of ceremony with which he marked his sense of blood-relationship. Indeed, she herself was accustomed to think that entire freedom from the necessity of behaving agreeably was included in the Almighty's intentions about families. She rose slowly without any sign of resentment and said in her usual muffled monotone, "Brother, I hope the new doctor will be able to do something for you. Solomon says there's great talk of his cleverness. I'm sure it's my wish you should be spared. And there's none more ready to nurse you than your own sister and your own nieces, if you'd only say the word. There's Rebecca, and Joanna, and Elizabeth, you know."

"Ay, ay, I remember—you'll see I've remembered 'em all—all dark and ugly. They'd need have some money, eh? There never was any beauty in the women of our family, but the Featherstones have always had some money, and the Waules too. Waule had money too. A warm man was Waule. Ay, ay; money's a good egg; and if you've got money to leave behind you, lay it in a warm nest. Good-bye, Mrs. Waule."

Here Mr. Featherstone pulled at both sides of his wig as if he wanted to deafen himself, and his sister went away ruminating on this oracular speech of his. Notwithstanding her jealousy of the Vincys and of Mary Garth, there remained as the nethermost sediment in her mental shallows a persuasion that her brother Peter Featherstone could never leave his chief property away from his blood-relations; else, why had the Almighty carried off his two wives both childless after he had gained so much by manganese and things turning up when nobody expected it? And why was there a Lowick parish church, and the Waules and Powderells all sitting in the same pew for generations, and the Featherstone pew next to them if the Sunday after her brother Peter's death everybody was to know that the property was gone out of the family? The human mind has at no period accepted a moral chaos, and so preposterous a result was not strictly conceivable. But we are frightened at much that is not strictly conceivable.

When Fred came in the old man eyed him with a peculiar twinkle, which the younger had often had reason to interpret as pride in the satisfactory details of his appearance.

"You two misses go away," said Mr. Featherstone. "I want to speak to Fred."

"Come into my room, Rosamond; you will not mind the cold for a little while," said Mary. The two girls had not only known each other in childhood but had been at the same provincial school together (Mary as an articled pupil) so that they had many memories in common and liked very well to talk in private. Indeed, this *tête-à-tête* was one of Rosamond's objects in coming to Stone Court.

Old Featherstone would not begin the dialogue till the door had been closed. He continued to look at Fred with the same twinkle and with one of his habitual grimaces, alternately screwing and widening his mouth; and when he spoke, it was in a low tone, which might be taken for that of an informer ready to be bought off, rather than for the tone of an offended senior. He was not a man to feel any strong moral indignation even on account of trespasses against himself. It was natural that others should want to get an advantage over him, but then, he was a little too cunning for them.

"So, sir, you've been paying ten per cent for money which you've promised to pay off by mortgaging my land when I'm dead and gone, eh? You put my life at a twelvemonth, say. But I can alter my will yet."

Fred blushed. He had not borrowed money in that way, for excellent reasons. But he was conscious of having spoken with some confidence (perhaps with more than he exactly remembered) about his prospect of getting Featherstone's land as a future means of paying present debts.

"I don't know what you refer to, sir. I have certainly never borrowed any money on such an insecurity. Please to explain."

"No, sir, it's you must explain. I can alter my will yet, let me tell you. I'm of sound mind—can reckon compound interest in my head and remember every fool's name as well as I could twenty years ago. What the deuce? I'm under eighty. I say, you must contradict this story."

"I have contradicted it, sir," Fred answered with a touch of impatience, not remembering that his uncle did not verbally discriminate contradicting from disproving, though no one was further from confounding the two ideas than old Featherstone, who often wondered that so many fools took his own assertions for proofs. "But I contradict it again. The story is a silly lie."

"Nonsense! You must bring dockiments. It comes from authority."

"Name the authority and make him name the man of whom I borrowed the money, and then I can disprove the story."

"It's pretty good authority, I think—a man who knows most of what goes on in Middlemarch. It's that fine, religious, charitable uncle o' yours. Come now!" Here Mr. Featherstone had his peculiar inward shake which signified merriment.

"Mr. Bulstrode?"

"Who else, eh?"

"Then the story has grown into this lie out of some sermonizing words he may have let fall about me. Do they pretend that he named the man who lent me the money?"

"If there is such a man, depend upon it Bulstrode knows him. But supposing you only tried to get the money lent and didn't get it—Bulstrode'ud know that too. You bring me a writing from Bulstrode to say he doesn't believe you've ever promised to pay your debts out o' my land. Come now!"

Mr. Featherstone's face required its whole scale of grimaces as a muscular outlet to his silent triumph in the soundness of his faculties.

Fred felt himself to be in a disgusting dilemma.

"You must be joking, sir. Mr. Bulstrode, like other men, believes scores of things that are not true, and he has a prejudice against me. I could easily get him to write that he knew no facts in proof of the report you speak of, though it might lead to unpleasantness. But I could hardly ask him to write down what he believes or does not believe about me." Fred paused an instant and then added in politic appeal to his uncle's vanity, "That is hardly a thing for a gentleman to ask."

But he was disappointed in the result.

"Ay, I know what you mean. You'd sooner offend me than Bulstrode. And what's he? He's got no land hereabout that ever I heard tell of. A speckilating fellow! He may come down any day when the Devil leaves off backing him. And that's what his religion means: he wants God A'mighty to come in. That's nonsense! There's one thing I made out pretty clear when I used to go to church, and it's this: God A'mighty sticks to the land. He promises land, and He gives land, and He makes chaps rich with corn and cattle. But you take the other side. You like Bulstrode and speckilation better than Featherstone and land."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Fred, rising, standing with his back to the fire, and beating his boot with his whip. "I like neither Bulstrode nor speculation." He spoke rather sulkily, feeling himself stalemated.

"Well, well, you can do without *me*, that's pretty clear," said old Featherstone, secretly disliking the possibility that Fred would show himself at all independent. "You neither want a bit of land to make a squire of you instead of a starving parson nor a lift of a hundred pound by the way. It's all one to me. I can make five codicils if I like, and I shall keep my bank-notes for a nest-egg. It's all one to me."

Fred coloured again. Featherstone had rarely given him presents of money, and at this moment it seemed almost harder to part with the immediate prospect of bank-notes than with the more distant prospect of the land.

"I am not ungrateful, sir. I never meant to show disregard for any kind intentions you might have towards me. On the contrary."

"Very good. Then prove it. You bring me a letter from Bulstrode saying he doesn't believe you've been cracking and promising to pay your debts out o' my land, and then, if there's any scrape you've got into, we'll see if I can't back you a bit. Come now! That's a bargain. Here, give me your arm. I'll try and walk round the room."

Fred, in spite of his irritation, had kindness enough in him to be a little sorry for the unloved, unvenerated old man, who with his dropsical legs looked more than usually pitiable in walking. While giving his arm, he thought that he should not himself like to be an old fellow with his constitution breaking up; and he waited good-temperedly, first before the window to hear the wonted remarks about the guinea-fowls and the weathercock, and then before the scanty bookshelves, of which the chief glories in dark calf were Josephus, Culpepper, Klopstock's *Messiah*, and several volumes of the *Gentleman's Magazine*.

"Read me the names o' the books. Come now! You're a college man."

Fred gave him the titles.

"What did Missy want with more books? What must you be bringing her more books for?"

"They amuse her, sir. She is very fond of reading."

"A little too fond," said Mr. Featherstone captiously. "She was for reading when she sat with me. But I put a stop to that. She's got the newspaper to read out loud. That's enough for one day, I should think. I can't abide to see her reading to herself. You mind and not bring her any more books, do you hear?"

"Yes, sir, I hear." Fred had received this order before and had secretly disobeyed it. He intended to disobey it again.

"Ring the bell," said Mr. Featherstone; "I want Missy to come down."

Rosamond and Mary had been talking faster than their male friends. They did not think of sitting down, but stood at the toilette-table near the window while Rosamond took off her hat, adjusted her veil, and applied little touches of her finger-

tips to her hair—hair of infantine fairness, neither flaxen nor yellow. Mary Garth seemed all the plainer standing at an angle between the two nymphs, the one in the glass and the one out of it, who looked at each other with eyes of heavenly blue, deep enough to hold the most exquisite meanings an ingenious beholder could put into them and deep enough to hide the meanings of the owner if these should happen to be less exquisite. Only a few children in Middlemarch looked blond by the side of Rosamond, and the slim figure displayed by her riding-habit had delicate undulations. In fact, most men in Middlemarch, except her brothers, held that Miss Vincy was the best girl in the world, and some called her an angel. Mary Garth, on the contrary, had the aspect of an ordinary sinner: she was brown; her curly, dark hair was rough and stubborn; her stature was low; and it would not be true to declare, in satisfactory antithesis, that she had all the virtues. Plainness has its peculiar temptations and vices quite as much as beauty; it is apt either to feign amiability, or not feigning it, to show all the repulsiveness of discontent. At any rate, to be called an ugly thing in contrast with that lovely creature, your companion, is apt to produce some effect beyond a sense of fine veracity and fitness in the phrase. At the age of two-and-twenty Mary had certainly not attained that perfect good sense and good principle which are usually recommended to the less fortunate girl, as if they were to be obtained in quantities ready mixed, with a flavour of resignation as required. Her shrewdness had a streak of satiric bitterness continually renewed and never carried utterly out of sight, except by a strong current of gratitude towards those who instead of telling her that she ought to be contented did something to make her so. Advancing womanhood had tempered her plainness, which was of a good human sort, such as the mothers of our race have very commonly worn in all latitudes under a more or less becoming headgear. Rembrandt would have painted her with pleasure and would have made her broad features look out of the canvas with intelligent honesty. For honesty, truth-telling fairness, was Mary's reigning virtue: she neither tried to create illusions nor indulged in them for her own behoof, and when she was in a good mood she had humour enough in her to laugh at herself. When she and Rosamond happened both to be reflected in the glass, she said laughingly, "What a brown patch I am by the side of you, Rosy! You are the most unbecoming companion."

"Oh no! No one thinks of your appearance, you are so sensible and useful, Mary. Beauty is of very little consequence in reality," said Rosamond, turning her head towards Mary, but with eyes swerving towards the new view of her neck in the glass.

"You mean *my* beauty," said Mary rather sardonically.

Rosamond thought, "Poor Mary, she takes the kindest things ill." Aloud she said, "What have you been doing lately?"

"I? Oh, minding the house—pouring out syrup—pretending to be amiable and contented—learning to have a bad opinion of everybody."

"It is a wretched life for you."

"No," said Mary curtly with a little toss of her head. "I think my life is pleasanter than your Miss Morgan's."

"Yes; but Miss Morgan is so uninteresting, and not young."

"She is interesting to herself, I suppose; and I am not at all sure that everything gets easier as one gets older."

"No," said Rosamond reflectively; "one wonders what such people do without any prospect. To be sure, there is religion as a support. But," she added, dimpling, "it is very different with you, Mary. You may have an offer."

"Has anyone told you he means to make me one?"

"Of course not. I mean, there is a gentleman who may fall in love with you, seeing you almost every day."

A certain change in Mary's face was chiefly determined by the resolve not to show any change.

"Does that always make people fall in love?" she answered carelessly; "it seems to me quite as often a reason for detesting each other."

"Not when they are interesting and agreeable. I hear that Mr. Lydgate is both."

"Oh, Mr. Lydgate!" said Mary with an unmistakable lapse into indifference. "You want to know something about him," she added, not choosing to indulge Rosamond's indirectness.

"Merely how you like him."

"There is no question of liking at present. My liking always wants some little kindness to kindle it. I am not magnanimous enough to like people who speak to me without seeming to see me."

"Is he so haughty?" said Rosamond with heightened satisfaction. "You know that he is of good family?"

"No; he did not give that as a reason."

"Mary! You are the oddest girl. But what sort of looking man is he? Describe him to me."

"How can one describe a man? I can give you an inventory: heavy eyebrows; dark eyes; a straight nose; thick, dark hair; large, solid, white hands; and—let me see—oh, an exquisite cambric pocket-handkerchief. But you will see him. You know this is about the time of his visits."

Rosamond blushed a little but said meditatively, "I rather like a haughty manner. I cannot endure a rattling young man."

"I did not tell you that Mr. Lydgate was haughty; but *il y en a pour tous les goûts*, as little Mamselle used to say, and if any girl can choose the particular sort of conceit she would like, I should think it is you, Rosy."

"Haughtiness is not conceit; I call Fred conceited."

"I wish no one said any worse of him. He should be more careful. Mrs. Waule has been telling Uncle that Fred is very unsteady." Mary spoke from a girlish impulse, which got the better of her judgement. There was a vague uneasiness associated with the word "unsteady" which she hoped Rosamond might say something to dissipate. But she purposely abstained from mentioning Mrs. Waule's more special insinuation.

"Oh, Fred is horrid!" said Rosamond. She would not have allowed herself so unsuitable a word to anyone but Mary.

"What do you mean by horrid?"

"He is so idle, and makes Papa so angry, and says he will not take orders."

"I think Fred is quite right."

"How can you say he is quite right, Mary? I thought you had more sense of religion."

"He is not fit to be a clergyman."

"But he ought to be fit."

"Well, then, he is not what he ought to be. I know some other people who are in the same case."

"But no one approves of them. I should not like to marry a clergyman, but there must be clergymen."

"It does not follow that Fred must be one."

"But when Papa has been at the expense of educating him for it! And only suppose, if he should have no fortune left him?"

"I can suppose that very well," said Mary dryly.

"Then I wonder you can defend Fred," said Rosamond, inclined to push this point.

"I don't defend him," said Mary, laughing; "I would defend any parish from having him for a clergyman."

"But of course if he were a clergyman, he must be different."

"Yes, he would be a great hypocrite; and he is not that yet."

"It is of no use saying anything to you, Mary. You always take Fred's part."

"Why should I not take his part?" said Mary, lighting up. "He would take mine. He is the only person who takes the least trouble to oblige me."

"You make me feel very uncomfortable, Mary," said Rosamond with her gravest mildness; "I would not tell Mamma for the world."

"What would you not tell her?" said Mary angrily.

"Pray do not go into a rage, Mary," said Rosamond mildly as ever.

"If your mamma is afraid that Fred will make me an offer, tell her that I would not marry him if he asked me. But he is not going to do so, that I am aware. He certainly never has asked me."

"Mary, you are always so violent."

"And you are always so exasperating."

"I? What can you blame me for?"

"Oh, blameless people are always the most exasperating. There is the bell—I think we must go down."

"I did not mean to quarrel," said Rosamond, putting on her hat.

"Quarrel? Nonsense; we have not quarrelled. If one is not to get into a rage sometimes, what is the good of being friends?"

"Am I to repeat what you have said?"

"Just as you please. I never say what I am afraid of having repeated. But let us go down."

Mr. Lydgate was rather late this morning, but the visitors stayed long enough to see him; for Mr. Featherstone asked Rosamond to sing to him, and she herself was so kind as to propose a second favourite song of his—"Flow on, Thou Shining River"—after she had sung "Home, Sweet Home" (which she detested). This hard-headed old Overreach approved of the sentimental song as the suitable garnish for girls and also as fundamentally fine, sentiment being the right thing for a song.

Mr. Featherstone was still applauding the last performance and assuring Missy that her voice was as clear as a blackbird's when Mr. Lydgate's horse passed the window.

His dull expectation of the usual disagreeable routine with an aged patient—who can hardly believe that medicine would not "set him up" if the doctor were only clever enough—added to his general disbelief in Middlemarch charms made a doubly effective background to this vision of Rosamond, whom old Featherstone made haste ostentatiously to introduce as his niece, though he had never thought it worth while to speak of Mary Garth in that light. Nothing escaped Lydgate in Rosamond's graceful behaviour: how delicately she waived the notice which the old man's want of taste had thrust upon her by a quiet gravity, not showing her dimples on the wrong occasion, but showing them afterwards in speaking to Mary, to whom she addressed herself with so much good-natured interest that Lydgate, after quickly examining Mary more fully than he had done before, saw an adorable kindness in Rosamond's eyes. But Mary from some cause looked rather out of temper.

"Miss Rosy has been singing me a song—you've nothing to say against that, eh, doctor?" said Mr. Featherstone. "I like it better than your physic."

"That has made me forget how the time was going," said Rosamond, rising to reach her hat, which she had laid aside before singing so that her flower-like head on its white stem was seen in perfection above her riding-habit. "Fred, we must really go."

"Very good," said Fred, who had his own reasons for not being in the best spirits and wanted to get away.

"Miss Vincy is a musician?" said Lydgate, following her with his eyes. (Every nerve and muscle in Rosamond was adjusted to the consciousness that she was being looked at. She was by nature an actress of parts that entered into her *physique*. She even acted her own character, and so well that she did not know it to be precisely her own.)

"The best in Middlemarch, I'll be bound," said Mr. Featherstone, "let the next be who she will. Eh, Fred? Speak up for your sister."

"I'm afraid I'm out of court, sir. My evidence would be good for nothing."

"Middlemarch has not a very high standard, Uncle," said Rosamond with a pretty lightness, going towards her whip, which lay at a distance.

Lydgate was quick in anticipating her. He reached the whip before she did and turned to present it to her. She bowed and looked at him; he of course was looking at her, and their eyes met with that peculiar meeting which is never arrived at by effort, but seems like a sudden Divine clearance of haze. I think Lydgate turned a little paler than usual, but Rosamond blushed deeply and felt a certain astonishment. After that, she was really anxious to go and did not know what sort of stupidity her uncle was talking of when she went to shake hands with him.

Yet this result, which she took to be a mutual impression, called falling in love, was just what Rosamond had contemplated beforehand. Ever since that important new arrival in Middlemarch she had woven a little future, of which something like this scene was the necessary beginning. Strangers, whether wrecked and clinging to a raft or duly escorted and accompanied by portmanteaus, have always had a circumstantial fascination for the virgin mind, against which native merit has urged itself in vain. And a stranger was absolutely necessary to Rosamond's social romance, which had always

turned on a lover and bridegroom who was not a Middlemarcher and who had no connexions at all like her own: of late, indeed, the construction seemed to demand that he should somehow be related to a baronet. Now that she and the stranger had met, reality proved much more moving than anticipation, and Rosamond could not doubt that this was the great epoch of her life. She judged of her own symptoms as those of awakening love, and she held it still more natural that Mr. Lydgate should have fallen in love at first sight of her. These things happened so often at balls, and why not by the morning light, when the complexion showed all the better for it? Rosamond, though no older than Mary, was rather used to being fallen in love with; but she, for her part, had remained indifferent and fastidiously critical towards both fresh sprig and faded bachelor. And here was Mr. Lydgate suddenly corresponding to her ideal, being altogether foreign to Middlemarch, carrying a certain air of distinction congruous with good family, and possessing connexions which offered vistas of that middle-class heaven, rank; a man of talent, also, whom it would be especially delightful to enslave; in fact, a man who had touched her nature quite newly and brought a vivid interest into her life which was better than any fancied "might-be" such as she was in the habit of opposing to the actual.

Thus, in riding home, both the brother and the sister were preoccupied and inclined to be silent. Rosamond, whose basis for her structure had the usual airy slightness, was of remarkably detailed and realistic imagination when the foundation had been once presupposed; and before they had ridden a mile she was far on in the costume and introductions of her wedded life, having determined on her house in Middlemarch and foreseen the visits she would pay to her husband's high-bred relatives at a distance, whose finished manners she could appropriate as thoroughly as she had done her school accomplishments, preparing herself thus for vaguer elevations which might ultimately come. There was nothing financial, still less sordid, in her previsions: she cared about what were considered refinements, and not about the money that was to pay for them.

Fred's mind, on the other hand, was busy with an anxiety which even his ready hopefulness could not immediately quell. He saw no way of eluding Featherstone's stupid demand without incurring consequences which he liked less even than the task of fulfilling it. His father was already out of humour with him and would be still more so if he were the occasion of any additional coolness between his own family and the Bulstrodes. Then, he himself hated having to go and speak to his uncle Bulstrode, and perhaps after drinking wine he had said many foolish things about Featherstone's property, and these had been magnified by report. Fred felt that he made a wretched figure as a fellow who bragged about expectations from a queer old miser like Featherstone and went to beg for certificates at his bidding. But—those expectations! He really had them, and he saw no agreeable alternative if he gave them up; besides, he had lately made a debt which galled him extremely, and old Featherstone had almost bargained to pay it off. The whole affair was miserably small: his debts were small, even his expectations were not anything so very magnificent. Fred had known men to whom he would have been ashamed of confessing the smallness of his scrapes. Such ruminations naturally produced a streak of misanthropic bitterness. To be born the son of a Middlemarch manufacturer and inevitable heir to nothing in particular while such men as Mainwaring and Vyan—certainly life was a poor business when a spirited young fellow with a good appetite for the best of everything had so poor an outlook.

It had not occurred to Fred that the introduction of Bulstrode's name in the matter was a fiction of old Featherstone's; nor could this have made any difference to his position. He saw plainly enough that the old man wanted to exercise his power by tormenting him a little, and also probably to get some satisfaction out of seeing him on unpleasant terms with Bulstrode. Fred fancied that he saw to the bottom of his uncle Featherstone's soul, though in reality half what he saw there was no more than the reflex of his own inclinations. The difficult task of knowing another soul is not for young gentlemen whose consciousness is chiefly made up of their own wishes.

Fred's main point of debate with himself was whether he should tell his father or try to get through the affair without his father's knowledge. It was probably Mrs. Waule who had been talking about him; and if Mary Garth had repeated Mrs. Waule's report to Rosamond, it would be sure to reach his father, who would as surely question him about it. He said to Rosamond as they slackened their pace, "Rosy, did Mary tell you that Mrs. Waule had said anything about me?"

"Yes, indeed, she did."

"What?"

"That you were very unsteady."

"Was that all?"

"I should think that was enough, Fred."

"You are sure she said no more?"

"Mary mentioned nothing else. But really, Fred, I think you ought to be ashamed."

"Oh, fudge! Don't lecture me. What did Mary say about it?"

"I am not obliged to tell you. You care so very much what Mary says, and you are too rude to allow me to speak."

"Of course I care what Mary says. She is the best girl I know."

"I should never have thought she was a girl to fall in love with."

"How do you know what men would fall in love with? Girls never know."

"At least, Fred, let me advise *you* not to fall in love with her, for she says she would not marry you if you asked her."

"She might have waited till I did ask her."

"I knew it would nettle you, Fred."

"Not at all. She would not have said so if you had not provoked her."

Before reaching home, Fred concluded that he would tell the whole affair as simply as possible to his father, who might perhaps take on himself the unpleasant business of speaking to Bulstrode.

BOOK II

OLD AND YOUNG

CHAPTER 13

1ST GENT. How class your man?—as better than the most,
Or, seeming better, worse beneath that cloak?
As saint or knave, pilgrim or hypocrite?
2ND GENT. Nay, tell me how you class your wealth of books,
The drifted relics of all time. As well
Sort them at once by size and livery:
Vellum, tall copies, and the common calf
Will hardly cover more diversity
Than all your labels cunningly devised
To class your unread authors.

In consequence of what he had heard from Fred, Mr. Vincy determined to speak with Mr. Bulstrode in his private room at the bank at half-past one, when he was usually free from other callers. But a visitor had come in at one o'clock, and Mr. Bulstrode had so much to say to him that there was little chance of the interview being over in half an hour. The banker's speech was fluent, but it was also copious, and he used up an appreciable amount of time in brief meditative pauses. Do not imagine his sickly aspect to have been of the yellow, black-haired sort: he had a pale blond skin; thin, grey-besprinkled brown hair; light-grey eyes; and a large forehead. Loud men called his subdued tone an undertone and sometimes implied that it was inconsistent with openness, though there seems to be no reason why a loud man should not be given to concealment of anything except his own voice, unless it can be shown that Holy Writ has placed the seat of candour in the lungs. Mr. Bulstrode had also a deferential, bending attitude in listening and an apparently fixed attentiveness in his eyes which made those persons who thought themselves worth hearing infer that he was seeking the utmost improvement from their discourse. Others, who expected to make no great figure, disliked this kind of moral lantern turned on them. If you are not proud of your cellar, there is no thrill of satisfaction in seeing your guest hold up his wine-glass to the light and look judicial. Such joys are reserved for conscious merit. Hence Mr. Bulstrode's closest attention was not agreeable to the publicans and sinners in Middlemarch; it was attributed by some to his being a Pharisee and by others to his being evangelical. Less superficial reasoners among them wished to know who his father and grandfather were, observing that five-and-twenty years ago nobody had ever heard of a Bulstrode in Middlemarch. To his present visitor, Lydgate, the scrutinizing look was a matter of indifference: he simply formed an unfavourable opinion of the banker's constitution and concluded that he had an eager inward life with little enjoyment of tangible things.

"I shall be exceedingly obliged if you will look in on me here occasionally, Mr. Lydgate," the banker observed after a brief pause. "If, as I dare to hope, I have the privilege of finding you a valuable co-adjutor in the interesting matter of hospital management, there will be many questions which we shall need to discuss in private. As to the new hospital, which is nearly finished, I shall consider what you have said about the advantages of the special destination for fevers. The decision will rest with me, for though Lord Medlicote has given the land and timber for the building, he is not disposed to give his personal attention to the object."

"There are few things better worth the pains in a provincial town like this," said Lydgate. "A fine fever hospital in addition to the old infirmary might be the nucleus of a medical school here when once we get our medical reforms; and what would do more for medical education than the spread of such schools over the country? A born provincial man who has a grain of public spirit as well as a few ideas should do what he can to resist the rush of everything that is little better than common towards London. Any valid professional aims may often find a freer, if not a richer, field in the provinces."

One of Lydgate's gifts was a voice habitually deep and sonorous, yet capable of becoming very low and gentle at the right moment. About his ordinary bearing there was a certain fling, a fearless expectation of success, a confidence in his own powers and integrity much fortified by contempt for petty obstacles or seductions of which he had had no experience. But this proud openness was made lovable by an expression of unaffected goodwill. Mr. Bulstrode perhaps liked him the better for the difference between them in pitch and manners; he certainly liked him the better, as Rosamond did, for being a stranger in Middlemarch. One can begin so many things with a new person—even begin to be a better man!

"I shall rejoice to furnish your zeal with fuller opportunities," Mr. Bulstrode answered; "I mean, by confiding to you the superintendence of my new hospital should a maturer knowledge favour that issue, for I am determined that so great an object shall not be shackled by our two physicians. Indeed, I am encouraged to consider your advent to this town as a gracious indication that a more manifest blessing is now to be awarded to my efforts, which have hitherto been much withstood. With regard to the old infirmary, we have gained the initial point—I mean your election. And now I hope you will not shrink from incurring a certain amount of jealousy and dislike from your professional brethren by presenting yourself as a reformer."

"I will not profess bravery," said Lydgate, smiling, "but I acknowledge a good deal of pleasure in fighting, and I should not care for my profession if I did not believe that better methods were to be found and enforced there as well as everywhere else."

"The standard of that profession is low in Middlemarch, my dear sir," said the banker. "I mean in knowledge and skill, not in social status, for our medical men are most of them connected with respectable townspeople here. My own imperfect

health has induced me to give some attention to those palliative resources which the divine mercy has placed within our reach. I have consulted eminent men in the metropolis, and I am painfully aware of the backwardness under which medical treatment labours in our provincial districts."

"Yes; with our present medical rules and education, one must be satisfied now and then to meet with a fair practitioner. As to all the higher questions which determine the starting point of the diagnosis—as to the philosophy of medical evidence—any glimmering of these can only come from a scientific culture of which country practitioners have usually no more notion than the man in the moon."

Mr. Bulstrode, bending and looking intently, found the form which Lydgate had given to his agreement not quite suited to his comprehension. Under such cimcumstances a judicious man changes the topic and enters on ground where his own gifts may be more useful.

"I am aware," he said, "that the peculiar bias of medical ability is towards material means. Nevertheless, Mr. Lydgate, I hope we shall not vary in sentiment as to a measure in which you are not likely to be actively concerned, but in which your sympathetic concurrence may be an aid to me. You recognize, I hope, the existence of spiritual interests in your patients?"

"Certainly I do. But those words are apt to cover different meanings to different minds."

"Precisely. And on such subjects wrong teaching is as fatal as no teaching. Now a point which I have much at heart to secure is a new regulation as to clerical attendance at the old infirmary. The building stands in Mr. Farebrother's parish. You know Mr. Farebrother?"

"I have seen him. He gave me his vote. I must call to thank him. He seems a very bright, pleasant little fellow. And I understand he is a naturalist."

"Mr. Farebrother, my dear sir, is a man deeply painful to contemplate. I suppose there is not a clergyman in this country who has greater talents." Mr. Bulstrode paused and looked meditative.

"I have not yet been pained by finding any excessive talent in Middlemarch," said Lydgate bluntly.

"What I desire," Mr. Bulstrode continued, looking still more serious, "is that Mr. Farebrother's attendance at the hospital should be superseded by the appointment of a chaplain—of Mr. Tyke, in fact—and that no other spiritual aid should be called in."

"As a medical man I could have no opinion on such a point unless I knew Mr. Tyke, and even then I should require to know the cases in which he was applied." Lydgate smiled, but he was bent on being circumspect.

"Of course you cannot enter fully into the merits of this measure at present. But"—here Mr. Bulstrode began to speak with a more chiselled emphasis—"the subject is likely to be referred to the medical board of the infirmary, and what I trust I may ask of you is that in virtue of the co-operation between us which I now look forward to, you will not, so far as you are concerned, be influenced by my opponents in this matter."

"I hope I shall have nothing to do with clerical disputes," said Lydgate. "The path I have chosen is to work well in my own profession."

"My responsibility, Mr. Lydgate, is of a broader kind. With me, indeed, this question is one of sacred accountableness, whereas with my opponents, I have good reason to say that it is an occasion for gratifying a spirit of worldly opposition. But I shall not therefore drop one iota of my convictions or cease to identify myself with that truth which an evil generation hates. I have devoted myself to this object of hospital improvement, but I will boldly confess to you, Mr. Lydgate, that I should have no interest in hospitals if I believed that nothing more was concerned therein than the cure of mortal diseases. I have another ground of action, and in the face of persecution I will not conceal it."

Mr. Bulstrode's voice had become a loud and agitated whisper as he said the last words.

"There we certainly differ," said Lydgate. But he was not sorry that the door was now opened and Mr. Vincy was announced. That florid sociable personage was become more interesting to him since he had seen Rosamond. Not that, like her, he had been weaving any future in which their lots were united; but a man naturally remembers a charming girl with pleasure and is willing to dine where he may see her again. Before he took leave, Mr. Vincy had given that invitation which he had been "in no hurry about," for Rosamond at breakfast had mentioned that she thought her uncle Featherstone had taken the new doctor into great favour.

Mr. Bulstrode, alone with his brother-in-law, poured himself out a glass of water and opened a sandwich-box.

"I cannot persuade you to adopt my regimen, Vincy?"

"No, no; I've no opinion of that system. Life wants padding," said Mr. Vincy, unable to omit his portable theory. "However," he went on, accenting the word, as if to dismiss all irrelevance, "what I came here to talk about was a little affair of my young scapegrace, Fred's."

"That is a subject on which you and I are likely to take quite as different views as on diet, Vincy."

"I hope not this time." (Mr. Vincy was resolved to be good-humoured.) "The fact is, it's about a whim of old Featherstone's. Somebody has been cooking up a story out of spite and telling it to the old man to try to set him against Fred. He's very fond of Fred and is likely to do something handsome for him; indeed, he has as good as told Fred that he means to leave him his land, and that makes other people jealous."

"Vincy, I must repeat that you will not get any concurrence from me as to the course you have pursued with your eldest son. It was entirely from worldly vanity that you destined him for the Church: with a family of three sons and four daughters, you were not warranted in devoting money to an expensive education which has succeeded in nothing but in giving him extravagant, idle habits. You are now reaping the consequences."

To point out other people's errors was a duty that Mr. Bulstrode rarely shrank from, but Mr. Vincy was not equally prepared to be patient. When a man has the immediate prospect of being mayor, and is ready, in the interests of commerce, to take up a firm attitude on politics generally, he has naturally a sense of his importance to the framework of things which seems to throw questions of private conduct into the background. And this particular reproof irritated him more than any other. It was eminently superfluous to him to be told that he was reaping the consequences. But he felt his neck under Bulstrode's yoke; and though he usually enjoyed kicking, he was anxious to refrain from that relief.

"As to that, Bulstrode, it's no use going back. I'm not one of your pattern men, and I don't pretend to be. I couldn't

foresee everything in the trade; there wasn't a finer business in Middlemarch than ours, and the lad was clever. My poor brother was in the Church, and would have done well, had got preferment already, but that stomach fever took him off; else he might have been a dean by this time. I think I was justified in what I tried to do for Fred. If you come to religion, it seems to me a man shouldn't want to carve out his meat to an ounce beforehand; one must trust a little to Providence and be generous. It's a good British feeling to try and raise your family a little; in my opinion, it's a father's duty to give his sons a fine chance."

"I don't wish to act otherwise than as your best friend, Vincy, when I say that what you have been uttering just now is one mass of worldliness and inconsistent folly."

"Very well," said Mr. Vincy, kicking in spite of resolutions, "I never professed to be anything but worldly; and what's more, I don't see anybody else who is not worldly. I suppose you don't conduct business on what you called unworldly principles. The only difference I see is that one worldliness is a little bit honester than another."

"This kind of discussion is unfruitful, Vincy," said Mr. Bulstrode, who, finishing his sandwich, had thrown himself back in his chair and shaded his eyes as if weary. "You had some more particular business."

"Yes, yes. The long and short of it is, somebody has told old Featherstone, giving you as the authority, that Fred has been borrowing or trying to borrow money on the prospect of his land. Of course you never said any such nonsense. But the old fellow will insist on it that Fred should bring him a denial in your handwriting; that is, just a bit of a note saying you don't believe a word of such stuff, either of his having borrowed or tried to borrow in such a fool's way. I suppose you can have no objection to do that."

"Pardon me. I have an objection. I am by no means sure that your son, in his recklessness and ignorance—I will use no severer word—has not tried to raise money by holding out his future prospects, or even that someone may not have been foolish enough to supply him on so vague a presumption; there is plenty of such lax money-lending as of other folly in the world."

"But Fred gives me his honour that he has never borrowed money on the pretence of any understanding about his uncle's land. He is not a liar. I don't want to make him better than he is. I have blown him up well—nobody can say I wink at what he does. But he is not a liar. And I should have thought—but I may be wrong—that there was no religion to hinder a man from believing the best of a young fellow when you don't know worse. It seems to me it would be a poor sort of religion to put a spoke in his wheel by refusing to say you don't believe such harm of him as you've got no good reason to believe."

"I am not at all sure that I should be befriending your son by smoothing his way to the future possession of Featherstone's property. I cannot regard wealth as a blessing to those who use it simply as a harvest for this world. You do not like to hear these things, Vincy, but on this occasion I feel called upon to tell you that I have no motive for furthering such a disposition of property as that which you refer to. I do not shrink from saying that it will not tend to your son's eternal welfare or to the glory of God. Why, then, should you expect me to pen this kind of affidavit, which has no object but to keep up a foolish partiality and secure a foolish bequest?"

"If you mean to hinder everybody from having money but saints and evangelists, you must give up some profitable partnerships, that's all I can say," Mr. Vincy burst out very bluntly. "It may be for the glory of God, but it is not for the glory of the Middlemarch trade that Plymdale's house uses those blue and green dyes it gets from the Brassing manufactory; they rot the silk, that's all I know about it. Perhaps if other people knew so much of the profit went to the glory of God, they might like it better. But I don't mind so much about that—I could get up a pretty row if I chose."

Mr. Bulstrode paused a little before he answered. "You pain me very much by speaking in this way, Vincy. I do not expect you to understand my grounds of action—it is not an easy thing even to thread a path for principles in the intricacies of the world—still less to make the thread clear for the careless and the scoffing. You must remember, if you please, that I stretch my tolerance towards you as my wife's brother and that it little becomes you to complain of me as withholding material help towards the worldly position of your family. I must remind you that it is not your own prudence or judgement that has enabled you to keep your place in the trade."

"Very likely not; but you have been no loser by my trade yet," said Mr. Vincy, thoroughly nettled (a result which was seldom much retarded by previous resolutions). "And when you married Harriet, I don't see how you could expect that our families should not hang by the same nail. If you've changed your mind and want my family to come down in the world, you'd better say so. I've never changed: I'm a plain Churchman now, just as I used to be before doctrines came up. I take the world as I find it, in trade and everything else. I'm contented to be no worse than my neighbours. But if you want us to come down in the world, say so. I shall know better what to do then."

"You talk unreasonably. Shall you come down in the world for want of this letter about your son?"

"Well, whether or not, I consider it very unhandsome of you to refuse it. Such doings may be lined with religion, but outside they have a nasty, dog-in-the-manger look. You might as well slander Fred: it comes pretty near to it when you refuse to say you didn't set a slander going. It's this sort of thing—this tyrannical spirit, wanting to play bishop and banker everywhere—it's this sort of thing makes a man's name stink."

"Vincy, if you insist on quarrelling with me, it will be exceedingly painful to Harriet as well as myself," said Mr. Bulstrode with a trifle more eagerness and paleness than usual.

"I don't want to quarrel. It's for my interest—and perhaps for yours too—that we should be friends. I bear you no grudge; I think no worse of you than I do of other people. A man who half starves himself and goes the length in family prayers and so on that you do believes in his religion whatever it may be; you could turn over your capital just as fast with cursing and swearing; plenty of fellows do. You like to be master, there's no denying that; you must be first chop in heaven, else you won't like it much. But you're my sister's husband, and we ought to stick together; and if I know Harriet, she'll consider it your fault if we quarrel because you strain at a gnat in this way and refuse to do Fred a good turn. And I don't mean to say I shall bear it well. I consider it unhandsome."

Mr. Vincy rose, began to button his greatcoat, and looked steadily at his brother-in-law, meaning to imply a demand for a decisive answer.

This was not the first time that Mr. Bulstrode had begun by admonishing Mr. Vincy and had ended by seeing a very unsatisfactory reflection of himself in the coarse, unflattering mirror which that manufacturer's mind presented to the subtler lights and shadows of his fellow-men; and perhaps his experience ought to have warned him how the scene would end. But a full-fed fountain will be generous with its waters even in the rain, when they are worse than useless, and a fine fount of admonition is apt to be equally irrepressible.

It was not in Mr. Bulstrode's nature to comply directly in consequence of uncomfortable suggestions. Before changing his course, he always needed to shape his motives and bring them into accordance with his habitual standard. He said at last, "I will reflect a little, Vincy. I will mention the subject to Harriet. I shall probably send you a letter."

"Very well. As soon as you can, please. I hope it will all be settled before I see you tomorrow."

CHAPTER 14

Follows here the strict receipt
For that sauce to dainty meat,
Named Idleness, which many eat
By preference, and call it sweet:
First watch for morsels, like a hound,
Mix well with buffets, stir them round
With good thick oil of flatteries,
And froth with mean self-lauding lies.
Serve warm: the vessels you must choose
To keep it in are dead men's shoes.

Mr. Bulstrode's consultation of Harriet seemed to have had the effect desired by Mr. Vincy, for early the next morning a letter came which Fred could carry to Mr. Featherstone as the required testimony.

The old gentleman was staying in bed on account of the cold weather, and as Mary Garth was not to be seen in the sitting-room, Fred went upstairs immediately and presented the letter to his uncle, who, propped up comfortably on a bed-rest, was not less able than usual to enjoy his consciousness of wisdom in distrusting and frustrating mankind. He put on his spectacles to read the letter, pursing up his lips and drawing down their corners.

"'Under the circumstances I will not decline to state my conviction—' Tchah! What fine words the fellow puts! He's as fine as an auctioneer. '—that your son Frederic has not obtained any advance of money on bequests promised by Mr. Featherstone—' Promised? Who said I had ever promised? I promise nothing—I shall make codicils as long as I like. '—and that considering the nature of such a proceeding, it is unreasonable to presume that a young man of sense and character would attempt it.' Ah, but the gentleman doesn't say you are a young man of sense and character; mark you that, sir! 'As to my own concern with any report of such a nature, I distinctly affirm that I never made any statement to the effect that your son had borrowed money on any property that might accrue to him on Mr. Featherstone's demise.' Bless my heart! *Property—accrue—demise!* Lawyer Standish is nothing to him. He couldn't speak finer if he wanted to borrow. Well"—Mr. Featherstone here looked over his spectacles at Fred while he handed back the letter to him with a contemptuous gesture—"you don't suppose I believe a thing because Bulstrode writes it out fine, eh?"

Fred coloured. "You wished to have the letter, sir. I should think it very likely that Mr. Bulstrode's denial is as good as the authority which told you what he denies."

"Every bit. I never said I believed either one or the other. And now what d'you expect?" said Mr. Featherstone curtly, keeping on his spectacles but withdrawing his hands under his wraps.

"I expect nothing, sir." Fred with difficulty restrained himself from venting his irritation. "I came to bring you the letter. If you like, I will bid you good morning."

"Not yet, not yet. Ring the bell; I want Missy to come."

It was a servant who came in answer to the bell.

"Tell Missy to come!" said Mr. Featherstone impatiently. "What business had she to go away?" He spoke in the same tone when Mary came.

"Why couldn't you sit still here till I told you to go? I want my waistcoat now. I told you always to put it on the bed."

Mary's eyes looked rather red, as if she had been crying. It was clear that Mr. Featherstone was in one of his most snappish humours this morning, and though Fred had now the prospect of receiving the much-needed present of money, he would have preferred being free to turn round on the old tyrant and tell him that Mary Garth was too good to be at his beck. Though Fred had risen as she entered the room, she had barely noticed him and looked as if her nerves were quivering with the expectation that something would be thrown at her. But she never had anything worse than words to dread. When she went to reach the waistcoat from a peg, Fred went up to her and said, "Allow me."

"Let it alone! You bring it, Missy, and lay it down here," said Mr. Featherstone. "Now you go away again till I call you," he added when the waistcoat was laid down by him. It was usual with him to season his pleasure in showing favours to one person by being especially disagreeable to another, and Mary was always at hand to furnish the condiment. When his own relatives came she was treated better. Slowly he took out a bunch of keys from the waistcoat pocket, and slowly he drew forth a tin box which was under the bedclothes.

"You expect I'm going to give you a little fortune, eh?" he said, looking above his spectacles and pausing in the act of opening the lid.

"Not at all, sir. You were good enough to speak of making me a present the other day, else, of course, I should not have thought of the matter." But Fred was of a hopeful disposition, and a vision had presented itself of a sum just large enough to deliver him from a certain anxiety. When Fred got into debt, it always seemed to him highly probable that something or other—he did not necessarily conceive what—would come to pass enabling him to pay in due time. And now that the providential occurrence was apparently close at hand, it would have been sheer absurdity to think that the supply would be short of the need: as absurd as a faith that believed in half a miracle for want of strength to believe in a whole one.

The deep-veined hands fingered many bank-notes one after the other, laying them down flat again, while Fred leaned

back in his chair, scorning to look eager. He held himself to be a gentleman at heart and did not like courting an old fellow for his money. At last Mr. Featherstone eyed him again over his spectacles and presented him with a little sheaf of notes: Fred could see distinctly that there were but five as the less significant edges gaped towards him. But then, each might mean fifty pounds. He took them, saying, “I am very much obliged to you, sir,” and was going to roll them up without seeming to think of their value. But this did not suit Mr. Featherstone, who was eyeing him intently.

“Come, don’t you think it worth your while to count ’em? You take money like a lord; I suppose you lose it like one.”

“I thought I was not to look a gift-horse in the mouth, sir. But I shall be very happy to count them.”

Fred was not so happy, however, after he had counted them. For they actually presented the absurdity of being less than his hopefulness had decided that they must be. What can the fitness of things mean, if not their fitness to a man’s expectations? Failing this, absurdity and atheism gape behind him. The collapse for Fred was severe when he found that he held no more than five twenties, and his share in the higher education of this country did not seem to help him. Nevertheless he said, with rapid changes in his fair complexion, “It is very handsome of you, sir.”

“I should think it is,” said Mr. Featherstone, locking his box and replacing it, then taking off his spectacles deliberately, and at length, as if his inward meditation had more deeply convinced him, repeating, “I should think it is handsome.”

“I assure you, sir, I am very grateful,” said Fred, who had had time to recover his cheerful air.

“So you ought to be. You want to cut a figure in the world, and I reckon Peter Featherstone is the only one you’ve got to trust to.” Here the old man’s eyes gleamed with a curiously mingled satisfaction in the consciousness that this smart young fellow relied upon him and that the smart young fellow was rather a fool for doing so.

“Yes, indeed; I was not born to very splendid chances. Few men have been more cramped than I have been,” said Fred with some sense of surprise at his own virtue, considering how hardly he was dealt with. “It really seems a little too bad to have to ride a broken-winded hunter and see men who are not half such good judges as yourself able to throw away any amount of money on buying bad bargains.”

“Well, you can buy yourself a fine hunter now. Eighty pounds is enough for that, I reckon—and you’ll have twenty pounds over to get yourself out of any little scrape,” said Mr. Featherstone, chuckling slightly.

“You are very good, sir,” said Fred with a fine sense of contrast between the words and his feeling.

“Ay, rather a better uncle than your fine uncle Bulstrode. You won’t get much out of his spekilations, I think. He’s got a pretty strong string round your father’s leg, by what I hear, eh?”

“My father never tells me anything about his affairs, sir.”

“Well, he shows some sense there. But other people find ’em out without his telling. *He’ll* never have much to leave you; he’ll most-like die without a will—he’s the sort of man to do it—let ’em make him mayor of Middlemarch as much as they like. But you won’t get much by his dying without a will, though you *are* the eldest son.”

Fred thought that Mr. Featherstone had never been so disagreeable before. True, he had never before given him quite so much money at once.

“Shall I destroy this letter of Mr. Bulstrode’s, sir?” said Fred, rising with the letter as if he would put it in the fire.

“Ay, ay, I don’t want it. It’s worth no money to me.”

Fred carried the letter to the fire and thrust the poker through it with much zest. He longed to get out of the room, but he was a little ashamed before his inner self, as well as before his uncle, to run away immediately after pocketing the money. Presently, the farm-bailiff came up to give his master a report, and Fred, to his unspeakable relief, was dismissed with the injunction to come again soon.

He had longed not only to be set free from his uncle, but also to find Mary Garth. She was now in her usual place by the fire, with sewing in her hands and a book open on the little table by her side. Her eyelids had lost some of their redness now, and she had her usual air of self-command.

“Am I wanted upstairs?” she said, half rising as Fred entered.

“No; I am only dismissed because Simmons is gone up.”

Mary sat down again and resumed her work. She was certainly treating him with more indifference than usual; she did not know how affectionately indignant he had felt on her behalf upstairs.

“May I stay here a little, Mary, or shall I bore you?”

“Pray sit down,” said Mary; “you will not be so heavy a bore as Mr. John Waule, who was here yesterday, and he sat down without asking my leave.”

“Poor fellow! I think he is in love with you.”

“I am not aware of it. And to me it is one of the most odious things in a girl’s life that there must always be some supposition of falling in love coming between her and any man who is kind to her, and to whom she is grateful. I should have thought that I, at least, might have been safe from all that. I have no ground for the nonsensical vanity of fancying everybody who comes near me is in love with me.”

Mary did not mean to betray any feeling, but in spite of herself she ended in a tremulous tone of vexation.

“Confound John Waule! I did not mean to make you angry. I didn’t know you had any reason for being grateful to him. I forgot what a great service you think it if any one snuffs a candle for you.” Fred also had his pride and was not going to show that he knew what had called forth this outburst of Mary’s.

“Oh, I am not angry, except with the ways of the world. I do like to be spoken to as if I had common sense. I really often feel as if I could understand a little more than I ever hear even from young gentlemen who have been to college.” Mary had recovered, and she spoke with a suppressed rippling undercurrent of laughter pleasant to hear.

“I don’t care how merry you are at my expense this morning,” said Fred, “I thought you looked so sad when you came upstairs. It is a shame you should stay here to be bullied in that way.”

“Oh, I have an easy life—by comparison. I have tried being a teacher, and I am not fit for that: my mind is too fond of wandering on its own way. I think any hardship is better than pretending to do what one is paid for and never really doing it. Everything here I can do as well as anyone else could; perhaps better than some—Rosy, for example. Though she is just the sort of beautiful creature that is imprisoned with ogres in fairy tales.”

"*Rosy!*" cried Fred in a tone of profound brotherly scepticism.

"Come, Fred!" said Mary emphatically. "*You* have no right to be so critical."

"Do you mean anything particular—just now?"

"No, I mean something general—always."

"Oh, that I am idle and extravagant. Well, I am not fit to be a poor man. I should not have made a bad fellow if I had been rich."

"You would have done your duty in that state of life to which it has not pleased God to call you," said Mary, laughing.

"Well, I couldn't do my duty as a clergyman, any more than you could do yours as a governess. You ought to have a little fellow-feeling there, Mary."

"I never said you ought to be a clergyman. There are other sorts of work. It seems to me very miserable not to resolve on some course and act accordingly."

"So I could, if—" Fred broke off, and stood up, leaning against the mantelpiece.

"If you were sure you should not have a fortune?"

"I did not say that. You want to quarrel with me. It is too bad of you to be guided by what other people say about me."

"How can I want to quarrel with you! I should be quarrelling with all my new books," said Mary, lifting the volume on the table. "However naughty you may be to other people, you are good to me."

"Because I like you better than anyone else. But I know you despise me."

"Yes, I do—a little," said Mary, nodding, with a smile.

"You would admire a stupendous fellow who would have wise opinions about everything."

"Yes, I should." Mary was sewing swiftly and seemed provokingly mistress of the situation. When a conversation has taken a wrong turn for us, we only get farther and farther into the swamp of awkwardness. This was what Fred Vincy felt.

"I suppose a woman is never in love with anyone she has always known—ever since she can remember—as a man often is. It is always some new fellow who strikes a girl."

"Let me see," said Mary, the corners of her mouth curling archly; "I must go back on my experience. There is Juliet—she seems an example of what you say. But then Ophelia had probably known Hamlet a long while; and Brenda Troil—she had known Mordaunt Merton ever since they were children, but then he seems to have been an estimable young man; and Minna was still more deeply in love with Cleveland, who was a stranger. Waverley was new to Flora MacIvor, but then she did not fall in love with him. And there are Olivia and Sophia Primrose, and Corinne—they may be said to have fallen in love with new men. Altogether, my experience is rather mixed."

Mary looked up with some roguishness at Fred, and that look of hers was very dear to him, though the eyes were nothing more than clear windows where observation sate laughingly. He was certainly an affectionate fellow, and as he had grown from boy to man, he had grown in love with his old playmate, notwithstanding that share in the higher education of the country which had exalted his views of rank and income.

"When a man is not loved, it is no use for him to say that he could be a better fellow—could do anything—I mean, if he were sure of being loved in return."

"Not of the least use in the world for him to say he *could* be better. Might, could, would—they are contemptible auxiliaries."

"I don't see how a man is to be good for much unless he has some one woman to love him dearly."

"I think the goodness should come before he expects that."

"You know better, Mary. Women don't love men for their goodness."

"Perhaps not. But if they love them, they never think them bad."

"It is hardly fair to say I am bad."

"I said nothing at all about you."

"I never shall be good for anything, Mary, if you will not say that you love me—if you will not promise to marry me—I mean, when I am able to marry."

"If I did love you, I would not marry you: I would certainly not promise ever to marry you."

"I think that is quite wicked, Mary. If you love me, you ought to promise to marry me."

"On the contrary, I think it would be wicked in me to marry you even if I did love you."

"You mean just as I am, without any means of maintaining a wife. Of course; I am but three-and-twenty."

"In that last point you will alter. But I am not so sure of any other alteration. My father says an idle man ought not to exist, much less be married."

"Then I am to blow my brains out?"

"No; on the whole I should think you would do better to pass your examination. I have heard Mr. Farebrother say it is disgracefully easy."

"That is all very fine. Anything is easy to him. Not that cleverness has anything to do with it. I am ten times cleverer than many men who pass."

"Dear me!" said Mary, unable to repress her sarcasm. "That accounts for the curates like Mr. Crowse. Divide your cleverness by ten, and the quotient—dear me!—is able to take a degree. But that only shows you are ten times more idle than the others."

"Well, if I did pass, you would not want me to go into the Church?"

"That is not the question—what I want you to do. You have a conscience of your own, I suppose. There! There is Mr. Lydgate. I must go and tell my uncle."

"Mary," said Fred, seizing her hand as she rose, "if you will not give me some encouragement, I shall get worse instead of better."

"I will not give you any encouragement," said Mary, reddening. "Your friends would dislike it, and so would mine. My father would think it a disgrace to me if I accepted a man who got into debt, and would not work!"

Fred was stung, and released her hand. She walked to the door, but there she turned and said: "Fred, you have always

been so good, so generous to me. I am not ungrateful. But never speak to me in that way again."

"Very well," said Fred sulkily, taking up his hat and whip. His complexion showed patches of pale pink and dead white. Like many a plucked idle young gentleman, he was thoroughly in love, and with a plain girl who had no money. But having Mr. Featherstone's land in the background and a persuasion that, let Mary say what she would, she really did care for him, Fred was not utterly in despair.

When he got home, he gave four of the twenties to his mother, asking her to keep them for him. "I don't want to spend that money, Mother. I want it to pay a debt with. So keep it safe away from my fingers."

"Bless you, my dear," said Mrs. Vincy. She doted on her eldest son and her youngest girl (a child of six), whom others thought her two naughtiest children. The mother's eyes are not always deceived in their partiality; she at least can best judge who is the tender, filial-hearted child. And Fred was certainly very fond of his mother. Perhaps it was his fondness for another person also that made him particularly anxious to take some security against his own liability to spend the hundred pounds. For the creditor to whom he owed a hundred and sixty held a firmer security in the shape of a bill signed by Mary's father.

CHAPTER 15

Black eyes you have left, you say,
Blue eyes fail to draw you;
Yet you seem more rapt to-day,
Than of old we saw you.

Oh I track the fairest fair
Through new haunts of pleasure;
Footprints here and echoes there
Guide me to my treasure;

Lo! she turns—immortal youth
Wrought to mortal stature,
Fresh as starlight's aged truth—
Many-named Nature!

A great historian, as he insisted on calling himself, who had the happiness to be dead a hundred and twenty years ago, and so to take his place among the colossi whose huge legs our living pettiness is observed to walk under, glories in his copious remarks and digressions as the least imitable part of his work, and especially in those initial chapters to the successive books of his history, where he seems to bring his arm-chair to the proscenium and chat with us in all the lusty ease of his fine English. But Fielding lived when the days were longer (for time, like money, is measured by our needs), when summer afternoons were spacious and the clock ticked slowly in the winter evenings. We belated historians must not linger after his example; and if we did so, it is probable that our chat would be thin and eager, as if delivered from a camp-stool in a parrot-house. I at least have so much to do in unravelling certain human lots and seeing how they were woven and interwoven that all the light I can command must be concentrated on this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of relevancies called the universe.

At present I have to make the new settler Lydgate better known to anyone interested in him than he could possibly be even to those who had seen the most of him since his arrival in Middlemarch. For surely all must admit that a man may be puffed and belauded, envied, ridiculed, counted upon as a tool and fallen in love with, or at least selected as a future husband, and yet remain virtually unknown—known merely as a cluster of signs for his neighbours' false suppositions. There was a general impression, however, that Lydgate was not altogether a common country doctor, and in Middlemarch at that time such an impression was significant of great things being expected from him. For everybody's family doctor was remarkably clever, and was understood to have immeasurable skill in the management and training of the most skittish or vicious diseases. The evidence of his cleverness was of the higher intuitive order, lying in his lady-patients' immovable conviction, and was unassailable by any objection except that their intuitions were opposed by others equally strong, each lady who saw medical truth in Wrench and "the strengthening treatment" regarding Toller and "the lowering system" as medical perdition. For the heroic times of copious bleeding and blistering had not yet departed, still less the time of thorough-going theory when disease in general was called by some bad name and treated accordingly without shilly-shally—as if, for example, it were to be called insurrection, which must not be fired on with blank-cartridge, but have its blood drawn at once. The strengtheners and the lowerers were all "clever" men in somebody's opinion, which is really as much as can be said for any living talents. Nobody's imagination had gone so far as to conjecture that Mr. Lydgate could know as much as Dr. Sprague and Dr. Minchin, the two physicians who alone could offer any hope when danger was extreme and when the smallest hope was worth a guinea. Still, I repeat, there was a general impression that Lydgate was something rather more uncommon than any general practitioner in Middlemarch. And this was true. He was but seven-and-twenty, an age at which many men are not quite common—at which they are hopeful of achievement, resolute in avoidance, thinking that Mammon shall never put a bit in their mouths and get astride their backs, but rather that Mammon, if they have anything to do with him, shall draw their chariot.

He had been left an orphan when he was fresh from a public school. His father, a military man, had made but little provision for three children, and when the boy Tertius asked to have a medical education, it seemed easier to his guardians to grant his request by apprenticing him to a country practitioner than to make any objections on the score of family dignity. He was one of the rarer lads who early get a decided bent and make up their minds that there is something particular in life which they would like to do for its own sake and not because their fathers did it. Most of us who turn to any subject with love remember some morning or evening hour when we got on a high stool to reach down an untried volume, or sat with parted lips listening to a new talker, or for very lack of books began to listen to the voices within as the first traceable beginning of our love. Something of that sort happened to Lydgate. He was a quick fellow, and when hot from play would toss himself in a corner and in five minutes be deep in any sort of book that he could lay his hands on: if it were Rasselas or Gulliver, so much the better, but Bailey's Dictionary would do, or the Bible with the Apocrypha in it. Something he must read when he was not riding the pony or running and hunting or listening to the talk of men. All this was true of him at ten years of age; he had then read through *Chrysal, or the Adventures of a Guinea,* which was neither milk for babes nor any chalky mixture meant to pass for milk, and it had already occurred to him that books were stuff and that

life was stupid. His school studies had not much modified that opinion, for though he “did” his classics and mathematics, he was not pre-eminent in them. It was said of him that Lydgate could do anything he liked, but he had certainly not yet liked to do anything remarkable. He was a vigorous animal with a ready understanding, but no spark had yet kindled in him an intellectual passion; knowledge seemed to him a very superficial affair, easily mastered; judging from the conversation of his elders, he had apparently got already more than was necessary for mature life. Probably this was not an exceptional result of expensive teaching at that period of short-waisted coats and other fashions which have not yet recurred. But one vacation, a wet day sent him to the small home library to hunt once more for a book which might have some freshness for him. In vain! Unless, indeed, he took down a dusty row of volumes with grey-paper backs and dingy labels—the volumes of an old cyclopaedia which he had never disturbed. It would at least be a novelty to disturb them. They were on the highest shelf, and he stood on a chair to get them down. But he opened the volume which he first took from the shelf; somehow one is apt to read in a makeshift attitude just where it might seem inconvenient to do so. The page he opened on was under the head of “Anatomy,” and the first passage that drew his eyes was on the valves of the heart. He was not much acquainted with valves of any sort, but he knew that *valvae* were folding doors, and through this crevice came a sudden light startling him with his first vivid notion of finely adjusted mechanism in the human frame. A liberal education had of course left him free to read the indecent passages in the school classics, but beyond a general sense of secrecy and obscenity in connexion with his internal structure, had left his imagination quite unbiassed so that for anything he knew his brains lay in small bags at his temples, and he had no more thought of representing to himself how his blood circulated than how paper served instead of gold. But the moment of vocation had come, and before he got down from his chair the world was made new to him by a presentiment of endless processes filling the vast spaces planked out of his sight by that wordy ignorance which he had supposed to be knowledge. From that hour Lydgate felt the growth of an intellectual passion.

We are not afraid of telling over and over again how a man comes to fall in love with a woman and be wedded to her, or else be fatally parted from her. Is it due to excess of poetry or of stupidity that we are never weary of describing what King James called a woman’s “makdom and her fairnesse,” never weary of listening to the twanging of the old troubadour strings, and are comparatively uninterested in that other kind of “makdom and fairnesse” which must be wooed with industrious thought and patient renunciation of small desires? In the story of this passion, too, the development varies: sometimes it is the glorious marriage, sometimes frustration and final parting. And not seldom the catastrophe is bound up with the other passion, sung by the troubadours. For in the multitude of middle-aged men who go about their vocations in a daily course determined for them much in the same way as the tie of their cravats, there is always a good number who once meant to shape their own deeds and alter the world a little. The story of their coming to be shapen after the average and fit to be packed by the gross is hardly ever told even in their consciousness; for perhaps their ardour in generous unpaid toil cooled as imperceptibly as the ardour of other youthful loves, till one day their earlier self walked like a ghost in its old home and made the new furniture ghastly. Nothing in the world more subtle than the process of their gradual change! In the beginning they inhaled it unknowingly; you and I may have sent some of our breath towards infecting them when we uttered our conforming falsities or drew our silly conclusions, or perhaps it came with the vibrations from a woman’s glance.

Lydgate did not mean to be one of those failures, and there was the better hope of him because his scientific interest soon took the form of a professional enthusiasm: he had a youthful belief in his bread-winning work not to be stifled by that initiation in makeshift called his ’prentice days; and he carried to his studies in London, Edinburgh, and Paris the conviction that the medical profession as it might be was the finest in the world, presenting the most perfect interchange between science and art, offering the most direct alliance between intellectual conquest and the social good. Lydgate’s nature demanded this combination: he was an emotional creature, with a flesh-and-blood sense of fellowship which withstood all the abstractions of special duty. He cared not only for “cases,” but for John and Elizabeth, especially Elizabeth.

There was another attraction in his profession: it wanted reform and gave a man an opportunity for some indignant resolve to reject its venal decorations and other humbug and to be the possessor of genuine though undemanded qualifications. He went to study in Paris with the determination that when he came home again he would settle in some provincial town as a general practitioner and resist the irrational severance between medical and surgical knowledge in the interest of his own scientific pursuits, as well as of the general advance; he would keep away from the range of London intrigues, jealousies, and social truckling and win celebrity, however slowly, as Jenner had done, by the independent value of his work. For it must be remembered that this was a dark period; and in spite of venerable colleges which used great efforts to secure purity of knowledge by making it scarce and to exclude error by a rigid exclusiveness in relation to fees and appointments, it happened that very ignorant young gentlemen were promoted in town, and many more got a legal right to practise over large areas in the country. Also, the high standard held up to the public mind by the College of Physicians, which gave its peculiar sanction to the expensive and highly rarefied medical instruction obtained by graduates of Oxford and Cambridge, did not hinder quackery from having an excellent time of it; for since professional practice chiefly consisted in giving a great many drugs, the public inferred that it might be better off with more drugs still if they could only be got cheaply, and hence swallowed large cubic measures of physic prescribed by unscrupulous ignorance which had taken no degrees. Considering that statistics had not yet embraced a calculation as to the number of ignorant or canting doctors which absolutely must exist in the teeth of all changes, it seemed to Lydgate that a change in the units was the most direct mode of changing the numbers. He meant to be a unit who would make a certain amount of difference towards that spreading change which would one day tell appreciably upon the averages, and in the meantime have the pleasure of making an advantageous difference to the viscera of his own patients. But he did not simply aim at a more genuine kind of practice than was common. He was ambitious of a wider effect: he was fired with the possibility that he might work out the proof of an anatomical conception and make a link in the chain of discovery.

Does it seem incongruous to you that a Middlemarch surgeon should dream of himself as a discoverer? Most of us, indeed, know little of the great originators until they have been lifted up among the constellations and already rule our

fates. But that Herschel, for example, who “broke the barriers of the heavens”—did he not once play a provincial church organ and give music lessons to stumbling pianists? Each of those Shining Ones had to walk on the earth among neighbours who perhaps thought much more of his gait and his garments than of anything which was to give him a title to everlasting fame; each of them had his little local personal history sprinkled with small temptations and sordid cares, which made the retarding friction of his course towards final companionship with the immortals. Lydgate was not blind to the dangers of such friction, but he had plenty of confidence in his resolution to avoid it as far as possible; being seven-and-twenty, he felt himself experienced. And he was not going to have his vanities provoked by contact with the showy worldly successes of the capital, but to live among people who could hold no rivalry with that pursuit of a great idea which was to be a twin object with the assiduous practice of his profession. There was fascination in the hope that the two purposes would illuminate each other: the careful observation and inference which was his daily work, the use of the lens to further his judgement in special cases, would further his thought as an instrument of larger inquiry. Was not this the typical pre-eminence of his profession? He would be a good Middlemarch doctor and by that very means keep himself in the track of far-reaching investigation. On one point he may fairly claim approval at this particular stage of his career: he did not mean to imitate those philanthropic models who make a profit out of poisonous pickles to support themselves while they are exposing adulterations, or hold shares in a gambling-hell that they may have leisure to represent the cause of public morality. He intended to begin in his own case some particular reforms which were quite certainly within his reach and much less of a problem than the demonstration of an anatomical conception. One of these reforms was to act stoutly on the strength of a recent legal decision and simply prescribe without dispensing drugs or taking percentage from druggists. This was an innovation for one who had chosen to adopt the style of general practitioner in a country town, and would be felt as offensive criticism by his professional brethren. But Lydgate meant to innovate in his treatment also, and he was wise enough to see that the best security for his practising honestly according to his belief was to get rid of systematic temptations to the contrary.

Perhaps that was a more cheerful time for observers and theorizers than the present; we are apt to think it the finest era of the world when America was beginning to be discovered, when a bold sailor, even if he were wrecked, might alight on a new kingdom; and about 1829 the dark territories of pathology were a fine America for a spirited young adventurer. Lydgate was ambitious above all to contribute towards enlarging the scientific, rational basis of his profession. The more he became interested in special questions of disease, such as the nature of fevers, the more keenly he felt the need for that fundamental knowledge of structure which just at the beginning of the century had been illuminated by the brief and glorious career of Bichat, who died when he was only one-and-thirty, but like another Alexander, left a realm large enough for many heirs. The great Frenchman first carried out the conception that living bodies, fundamentally considered, are not associations of organs which can be understood by studying them first apart and then, as it were, federally, but must be regarded as consisting of certain primary webs or tissues, out of which the various organs—brain, heart, lungs, and so on—are compacted, as the various accommodations of a house are built up in various proportions of wood, iron, stone, brick, zinc, and the rest, each material having its peculiar composition and proportions. No man, one sees, can understand and estimate the entire structure or its parts—what are its frailties and what its repairs—without knowing the nature of the materials. And the conception wrought out by Bichat, with his detailed study of the different tissues, acted necessarily on medical questions as the turning of gas-light would act on a dim, oil-lit street, showing new connexions and hitherto hidden facts of structure which must be taken into account in considering the symptoms of maladies and the action of medicaments. But results which depend on human conscience and intelligence work slowly, and now at the end of 1829, most medical practice was still strutting or shambling along the old paths, and there was still scientific work to be done which might have seemed to be a direct sequence of Bichat’s. This great seer did not go beyond the consideration of the tissues as ultimate facts in the living organism, marking the limit of anatomical analysis; but it was open to another mind to say, “Have not these structures some common basis from which they have all started, as your sarsnet, gauze, net, satin, and velvet from the raw cocoon?” Here would be another light, as of oxy-hydrogen, showing the very grain of things and revising all former explanations. Of this sequence to Bichat’s work, already vibrating along many currents of the European mind, Lydgate was enamoured; he longed to demonstrate the more intimate relations of living structure and help to define men’s thought more accurately after the true order. The work had not yet been done, but only prepared for those who knew how to use the preparation. What was the primitive tissue? In that way Lydgate put the question—not quite in the way required by the awaiting answer; but such missing of the right word befalls many seekers. And he counted on quiet intervals to be watchfully seized, for taking up the threads of investigation—on many hints to be won from diligent application, not only of the scalpel, but of the microscope, which research had begun to use again with new enthusiasm of reliance. Such was Lydgate’s plan of his future: to do good small work for Middlemarch and great work for the world.

He was certainly a happy fellow at this time: to be seven-and-twenty, without any fixed vices, with a generous resolution that his action should be beneficent, and with ideas in his brain that made life interesting quite apart from the *cultus* of horse-flesh and other mystic rites of costly observance, which the eight hundred pounds left him after buying his practice would certainly not have gone far in paying for. He was at a starting point which makes many a man’s career a fine subject for betting, if there were any gentlemen given to that amusement who could appreciate the complicated probabilities of an arduous purpose, with all the possible thwartings and furtherings of circumstance, all the niceties of inward balance, by which a man swims and makes his point or else is carried headlong. The risk would remain, even with close knowledge of Lydgate’s character; for character too is a process and an unfolding. The man was still in the making, as much as the Middlemarch doctor and immortal discoverer, and there were both virtues and faults capable of shrinking or expanding. The faults will not, I hope, be a reason for the withdrawal of your interest in him. Among our valued friends is there not someone or other who is a little too self-confident and disdainful, whose distinguished mind is a little spotted with commonness, who is a little pinched here and protuberant there with native prejudices, or whose better energies are liable to lapse down the wrong channel under the influence of transient solicitations? All these things might be alleged against Lydgate, but then, they are the periphrases of a polite preacher who talks of Adam and would not like to mention anything painful to the pew-renters. The particular faults from which these delicate generalities are distilled have distinguishable

physiognomies, diction, accent, and grimaces, filling up parts in very various dramas. Our vanities differ as our noses do, all conceit is not the same conceit, but varies in correspondence with the minutiae of mental make in which one of us differs from another. Lydgate's conceit was of the arrogant sort, never simpering, never impertinent, but massive in its claims and benevolently contemptuous. He would do a great deal for noodles, being sorry for them and feeling quite sure that they could have no power over him; he had thought of joining the Saint Simonians when he was in Paris in order to turn them against some of their own doctrines. All his faults were marked by kindred traits and were those of a man who had a fine baritone, whose clothes hung well upon him, and who even in his ordinary gestures had an air of inbred distinction. "Where then lay the spots of commonness?" says a young lady enamoured of that careless grace. How could there be any commonness in a man so well-bred, so ambitious of social distinction, so generous and unusual in his views of social duty? As easily as there may be stupidity in a man of genius if you take him unawares on the wrong subject, or as many a man who has the best will to advance the social millennium might be ill-inspired in imagining its lighter pleasures, unable to go beyond Offenbach's music or the brilliant punning in the last burlesque. Lydgate's spots of commonness lay in the complexion of his prejudices, which, in spite of noble intention and sympathy, were half of them such as are found in ordinary men of the world: that distinction of mind which belonged to his intellectual ardour did not penetrate his feeling and judgement about furniture or women or the desirability of its being known (without his telling) that he was better born than other country surgeons. He did not mean to think of furniture at present; but whenever he did so, it was to be feared that neither biology nor schemes of reform would lift him above the vulgarity of feeling that there would be an incompatibility in his furniture not being of the best.

As to women, he had once already been drawn headlong by impetuous folly, which he meant to be final, since marriage at some distant period would of course not be impetuous. For those who want to be acquainted with Lydgate it will be good to know what was that case of impetuous folly, for it may stand as an example of the fitful swerving of passion to which he was prone, together with the chivalrous kindness which helped to make him morally lovable. The story can be told without many words. It happened when he was studying in Paris, and just at the time when, over and above his other work, he was occupied with some galvanic experiments. One evening, tired with his experimenting, and not being able to elicit the facts he needed, he left his frogs and rabbits to some repose under their trying and mysterious dispensation of unexplained shocks and went to finish his evening at the theatre of the Porte Saint Martin, where there was a melodrama which he had already seen several times, attracted not by the ingenious work of the collaborating authors, but by an actress whose part it was to stab her lover, mistaking him for the evil-designing duke of the piece. Lydgate was in love with this actress, as a man is in love with a woman whom he never expects to speak to. She was a Provençale, with dark eyes, a Greek profile, and rounded, majestic form, having that sort of beauty which carries a sweet matronliness even in youth, and her voice was a soft cooing. She had but lately come to Paris, and bore a virtuous reputation, her husband acting with her as the unfortunate lover. It was her acting which was "no better than it should be," but the public was satisfied. Lydgate's only relaxation now was to go and look at this woman, just as he might have thrown himself under the breath of the sweet south on a bank of violets for a while, without prejudice to his galvanism, to which he would presently return. But this evening the old drama had a new catastrophe. At the moment when the heroine was to act the stabbing of her lover and he was to fall gracefully, the wife veritably stabbed her husband, who fell as death willed. A wild shriek pierced the house, and the Provençale fell swooning; a shriek and a swoon were demanded by the play, but the swooning too was real this time. Lydgate leaped and climbed, he hardly knew how, onto the stage and was active in help, making the acquaintance of his heroine by finding a contusion on her head and lifting her gently in his arms. Paris rang with the story of this death: was it a murder? Some of the actress's warmest admirers were inclined to believe in her guilt and liked her the better for it (such was the taste of those times), but Lydgate was not one of these. He vehemently contended for her innocence, and the remote impersonal passion for her beauty which he had felt before had passed now into personal devotion and tender thought of her lot. The notion of murder was absurd; no motive was discoverable, the young couple being understood to dote on each other; and it was not unprecedented that an accidental slip of the foot should have brought these grave consequences. The legal investigation ended in Madame Laure's release. Lydgate by this time had had many interviews with her and found her more and more adorable. She talked little, but that was an additional charm. She was melancholy and seemed grateful; her presence was enough, like that of the evening light. Lydgate was madly anxious about her affection and jealous lest any other man than himself should win it and ask her to marry him. But instead of reopening her engagement at the Porte Saint Martin, where she would have been all the more popular for the fatal episode, she left Paris without warning, forsaking her little court of admirers. Perhaps no one carried inquiry far except Lydgate, who felt that all science had come to a standstill, while he imagined the unhappy Laure, stricken by ever-wandering sorrow, herself wandering, and finding no faithful comforter. Hidden actresses, however, are not so difficult to find as some other hidden facts, and it was not long before Lydgate gathered indications that Laure had taken the route to Lyons. He found her at last acting with great success at Avignon under the same name, looking more majestic than ever as a forsaken wife carrying her child in her arms. He spoke to her after the play, was received with the usual quietude which seemed to him beautiful as clear depths of water, and obtained leave to visit her the next day, when he was bent on telling her that he adored her and on asking her to marry him. He knew that this was like the sudden impulse of a madman—incongruous even with his habitual foibles. No matter! It was the one thing which he was resolved to do. He had two selves within him apparently, and they must learn to accommodate each other and bear reciprocal impediments. Strange that some of us, with quick alternate vision, see beyond our infatuations, and even while we rave on the heights, behold the wide plain where our persistent self pauses and awaits us.

To have approached Laure with any suit that was not reverentially tender would have been simply a contradiction of his whole feeling towards her.

"You have come all the way from Paris to find me?" she said to him the next day, sitting before him with folded arms and looking at him with eyes that seemed to wonder as an untamed ruminating animal wonders. "Are all Englishmen like that?"

"I came because I could not live without trying to see you. You are lonely; I love you; I want you to consent to be my

wife; I will wait, but I want you to promise that you will marry me—no one else."

Laure looked at him in silence with a melancholy radiance from under her grand eyelids until he was full of rapturous certainty and knelt close to her knees.

"I will tell you something," she said in her cooing way, keeping her arms folded. "My foot really slipped."

"I know, I know," said Lydgate deprecatingly. "It was a fatal accident—a dreadful stroke of calamity that bound me to you the more."

Again Laure paused a little and then said slowly, "*I meant to do it.*"

Lydgate, strong man as he was, turned pale and trembled; moments seemed to pass before he rose and stood at a distance from her.

"There was a secret, then," he said at last, even vehemently. "He was brutal to you; you hated him."

"No! He wearied me; he was too fond; he would live in Paris, and not in my country; that was not agreeable to me."

"Great God!" said Lydgate in a groan of horror. "And you planned to murder him?"

"I did not plan, it came to me in the play—*I meant to do it*."

Lydgate stood mute and unconsciously pressed his hat on while he looked at her. He saw this woman—the first to whom he had given his young adoration—amid the throng of stupid criminals.

"You are a good young man," she said. "But I do not like husbands. I will never have another."

Three days afterwards Lydgate was at his galvanism again in his Paris chambers, believing that illusions were at an end for him. He was saved from hardening effects by the abundant kindness of his heart and his belief that human life might be made better. But he had more reason than ever for trusting his judgement now that it was so experienced; and henceforth he would take a strictly scientific view of woman, entertaining no expectations but such as were justified beforehand.

No one in Middlemarch was likely to have such a notion of Lydgate's past as has here been faintly shadowed, and indeed the respectable townsfolk there were not more given than mortals generally to any eager attempt at exactness in the representation to themselves of what did not come under their own senses. Not only young virgins of that town but grey-bearded men also were often in haste to conjecture how a new acquaintance might be wrought into their purposes, contented with very vague knowledge as to the way in which life had been shaping him for that instrumentality. Middlemarch, in fact, counted on swallowing Lydgate and assimilating him very comfortably.

CHAPTER 16

All that in woman is adored
In thy fair self I find—
For the whole sex can but afford
The handsome and the kind.

—SIR CHARLES SEDLEY

The question whether Mr. Tyke should be appointed as salaried chaplain to the hospital was an exciting topic to the Middlemarchers, and Lydgate heard it discussed in a way that threw much light on the power exercised in the town by Mr. Bulstrode. The banker was evidently a ruler, but there was an opposition party, and even among his supporters there were some who allowed it to be seen that their support was a compromise and who frankly stated their impression that the general scheme of things, and especially the casualties of trade, required you to hold a candle to the Devil.

Mr. Bulstrode's power was not due simply to his being a country banker who knew the financial secrets of most traders in the town and could touch the springs of their credit; it was fortified by a beneficence that was at once ready and severe—ready to confer obligations and severe in watching the result. He had gathered, as an industrious man always at his post, a chief share in administering the town charities, and his private charities were both minute and abundant. He would take a great deal of pains about apprenticing Tegg, the shoemaker's son, and he would watch over Tegg's churchgoing; he would defend Mrs. Strype, the washerwoman, against Stubbs's unjust exaction on the score of her drying-ground, and he would himself scrutinize a calumny against Mrs. Strype. His private minor loans were numerous, but he would inquire strictly into the circumstances both before and after. In this way a man gathers a domain in his neighbours' hope and fear as well as gratitude; and power, when once it has got into that subtle region, propagates itself, spreading out of all proportion to its external means. It was a principle with Mr. Bulstrode to gain as much power as possible that he might use it for the glory of God. He went through a great deal of spiritual conflict and inward argument in order to adjust his motives and make clear to himself what God's glory required. But as we have seen, his motives were not always rightly appreciated. There were many crass minds in Middlemarch whose reflective scales could only weigh things in the lump, and they had a strong suspicion that since Mr. Bulstrode could not enjoy life in their fashion, eating and drinking so little as he did and worreting himself about everything, he must have a sort of vampire's feast in the sense of mastery.

The subject of the chaplaincy came up at Mr. Vincy's table when Lydgate was dining there, and the family connexion with Mr. Bulstrode did not, he observed, prevent some freedom of remark even on the part of the host himself, though his reasons against the proposed arrangement turned entirely on his objection to Mr. Tyke's sermons, which were all doctrine, and his preference for Mr. Farebrother, whose sermons were free from that taint. Mr. Vincy liked well enough the notion of the chaplain's having a salary, supposing it were given to Farebrother, who was as good a little fellow as ever breathed, and the best preacher anywhere, and companionable too.

"What line shall you take, then?" said Mr. Chichely, the coroner, a great coursing comrade of Mr. Vincy's.

"Oh, I'm precious glad I'm not one of the directors now. I shall vote for referring the matter to the directors and the Medical Board together. I shall roll some of my responsibility on your shoulders, doctor," said Mr. Vincy, glancing first at Dr. Sprague, the senior physician of the town, and then at Lydgate, who sat opposite. "You medical gentlemen must consult which sort of black draught you will prescribe, eh, Mr. Lydgate?"

"I know little of either," said Lydgate; "but in general, appointments are apt to be made too much a question of personal liking. The fittest man for a particular post is not always the best fellow or the most agreeable. Sometimes, if you wanted to get a reform, your only way would be to pension off the good fellows whom everybody is fond of and put them out of the question."

Dr. Sprague, who was considered the physician of most "weight," though Dr. Minchin was usually said to have more "penetration," divested his large, heavy face of all expression and looked at his wine-glass while Lydgate was speaking. Whatever was not problematical and suspected about this young man—for example, a certain showiness as to foreign ideas and a disposition to unsettle what had been settled and forgotten by his elders—was positively unwelcome to a physician whose standing had been fixed thirty years before by a treatise on meningitis, of which at least one copy marked "own" was bound in calf. For my part I have some fellow-feeling with Dr. Sprague; one's self-satisfaction is an untaxed kind of property which it is very unpleasant to find depreciated.

Lydgate's remark, however, did not meet the sense of the company. Mr. Vincy said that if he could have *his* way, he would not put disagreeable fellows anywhere.

"Hang your reforms!" said Mr. Chichely. "There's no greater humbug in the world. You never hear of a reform but it means some trick to put in new men. I hope you are not one of the 'Lancet's' men, Mr. Lydgate—wanting to take the coronership out of the hands of the legal profession; your words appear to point that way."

"I disapprove of Wakley," interposed Dr. Sprague, "no man more: he is an ill-intentioned fellow who would sacrifice the respectability of the profession, which everybody knows depends on the London colleges, for the sake of getting some notoriety for himself. There are men who don't mind about being kicked blue if they can only get talked about. But Wakley is right sometimes," the doctor added judicially. "I could mention one or two points in which Wakley is in the right."

“Oh, well,” said Mr. Chichely, “I blame no man for standing up in favour of his own cloth; but coming to argument, I should like to know how a coroner is to judge of evidence if he has not had a legal training?”

“In my opinion,” said Lydgate, “legal training only makes a man more incompetent in questions that require knowledge of another kind. People talk about evidence as if it could really be weighed in scales by a blind Justice. No man can judge what is good evidence on any particular subject unless he knows that subject well. A lawyer is no better than an old woman at a post-mortem examination. How is he to know the action of a poison? You might as well say that scanning verse will teach you to scan the potato crops.”

“You are aware, I suppose, that it is not the coroner’s business to conduct the post-mortem, but only to take the evidence of the medical witness?” said Mr. Chichely with some scorn.

“Who is often almost as ignorant as the coroner himself,” said Lydgate. “Questions of medical jurisprudence ought not to be left to the chance of decent knowledge in a medical witness, and the coroner ought not to be a man who will believe that strychnine will destroy the coats of the stomach if an ignorant practitioner happens to tell him so.”

Lydgate had really lost sight of the fact that Mr. Chichely was His Majesty’s coroner and ended innocently with the question, “Don’t you agree with me, Dr. Sprague?”

“To a certain extent—with regard to populous districts, and in the metropolis,” said the doctor. “But I hope it will be long before this part of the country loses the services of my friend Chichely, even though it might get the best man in our profession to succeed him. I am sure Vincy will agree with me.”

“Yes, yes, give me a coroner who is a good coursing man,” said Mr. Vincy jovially. “And in my opinion, you’re safest with a lawyer. Nobody can know everything. Most things are ‘visitation of God.’ And as to poisoning, why, what you want to know is the law. Come, shall we join the ladies?”

Lydgate’s private opinion was that Mr. Chichely might be the very coroner without bias as to the coats of the stomach, but he had not meant to be personal. This was one of the difficulties of moving in good Middlemarch society: it was dangerous to insist on knowledge as a qualification for any salaried office. Fred Vincy had called Lydgate a prig, and now Mr. Chichely was inclined to call him prick-eared, especially when, in the drawing-room, he seemed to be making himself eminently agreeable to Rosamond, whom he had easily monopolized in a *tête-à-tête*, since Mrs. Vincy herself sat at the tea-table. She resigned no domestic function to her daughter; and the matron’s blooming, good-natured face, with the too volatile pink strings floating from her fine throat, and her cheery manners to husband and children, was certainly among the great attractions of the Vincy house—attractions which made it all the easier to fall in love with the daughter. The tinge of unpretentious, inoffensive vulgarity in Mrs. Vincy gave more effect to Rosamond’s refinement, which was beyond what Lydgate had expected.

Certainly, small feet and perfectly turned shoulders aid the impression of refined manners, and the right thing said seems quite astonishingly right when it is accompanied with exquisite curves of lip and eyelid. And Rosamond could say the right thing, for she was clever with that sort of cleverness which catches every tone except the humorous. Happily she never attempted to joke, and this perhaps was the most decisive mark of her cleverness.

She and Lydgate readily got into conversation. He regretted that he had not heard her sing the other day at Stone Court. The only pleasure he allowed himself during the latter part of his stay in Paris was to go and hear music.

“You have studied music, probably?” said Rosamond.

“No, I know the notes of many birds, and I know many melodies by ear, but the music that I don’t know at all, and have no notion about, delights me—affects me. How stupid the world is that it does not make more use of such a pleasure within its reach!”

“Yes, and you will find Middlemarch very tuneless. There are hardly any good musicians. I only know two gentlemen who sing at all well.”

“I suppose it is the fashion to sing comic songs in a rhythmic way, leaving you to fancy the tune—very much as if it were tapped on a drum?”

“Ah, you have heard Mr. Bowyer,” said Rosamond with one of her rare smiles. “But we are speaking very ill of our neighbours.”

Lydgate was almost forgetting that he must carry on the conversation, in thinking how lovely this creature was, her garment seeming to be made out of the faintest blue sky, herself so immaculately blond, as if the petals of some gigantic flower had just opened and disclosed her; and yet with this infantine blondness, showing so much ready, self-possessed grace. Since he had had the memory of Laure, Lydgate had lost all taste for large-eyed silence; the divine cow no longer attracted him, and Rosamond was her very opposite. But he recalled himself.

“You will let me hear some music tonight, I hope.”

“I will let you hear my attempts if you like,” said Rosamond. “Papa is sure to insist on my singing. But I shall tremble before you, who have heard the best singers in Paris. I have heard very little; I have only once been to London. But our organist at St. Peter’s is a good musician, and I go on studying with him.”

“Tell me what you saw in London.”

“Very little.” (A more naïve girl would have said, “Oh, everything!” But Rosamond knew better.) “A few of the ordinary sights, such as raw country girls are always taken to.”

“Do you call yourself a raw country girl?” said Lydgate, looking at her with an involuntary emphasis of admiration, which made Rosamond blush with pleasure. But she remained simply serious, turned her long neck a little, and put up her hand to touch her wondrous hair-plaits—an habitual gesture with her as pretty as any movements of a kitten’s paw. Not that Rosamond was in the least like a kitten: she was a sylph caught young and educated at Mrs. Lemon’s.

“I assure you my mind is raw,” she said immediately; “I pass at Middlemarch. I am not afraid of talking to our old neighbours. But I am really afraid of you.”

“An accomplished woman almost always knows more than we men, though her knowledge is of a different sort. I am sure you could teach me a thousand things—as an exquisite bird could teach a bear if there were any common language between them. Happily, there is a common language between women and men, and so the bears can get taught.”

“Ah, there is Fred beginning to strum! I must go and hinder him from jarring all your nerves,” said Rosamond, moving to the other side of the room, where Fred, having opened the piano at his father’s desire, that Rosamond might give them some music, was parenthetically performing “Cherry Ripe!” with one hand. Able men who have passed their examinations will do these things sometimes, not less than the plucked Fred.

“Fred, pray defer your practising till tomorrow; you will make Mr. Lydgate ill,” said Rosamond. “He has an ear.”

Fred laughed and went on with his tune to the end.

Rosamond turned to Lydgate, smiling gently, and said, “You perceive, the bears will not always be taught.”

“Now then, Rosy!” said Fred, springing from the stool and twisting it upward for her with a hearty expectation of enjoyment. “Some good rousing tunes first.”

Rosamond played admirably. Her master at Mrs. Lemon’s school (close to a county town with a memorable history that had its relics in church and castle) was one of those excellent musicians here and there to be found in our provinces, worthy to compare with many a noted kapellmeister in a country which offers more plentiful conditions of musical celebrity. Rosamond, with the executant’s instinct, had seized his manner of playing and gave forth his large rendering of noble music with the precision of an echo. It was almost startling, heard for the first time. A hidden soul seemed to be flowing forth from Rosamond’s fingers; and so indeed it was, since souls live on in perpetual echoes, and to all fine expression there goes somewhere an originating activity, if it be only that of an interpreter. Lydgate was taken possession of and began to believe in her as something exceptional. After all, he thought, one need not be surprised to find the rare conjunctions of nature under circumstances apparently unfavourable; come where they may, they always depend on conditions that are not obvious. He sat looking at her and did not rise to pay her any compliments, leaving that to others now that his admiration was deepened.

Her singing was less remarkable, but also well trained and sweet to hear as a chime perfectly in tune. It is true she sang “Meet Me by Moonlight,” and “I’ve Been Roaming,” for mortals must share the fashions of their time, and none but the ancients can be always classical. But Rosamond could also sing “Black-eyed Susan” with effect, or Haydn’s canzonets, or “Voi, che sapete,” or “Batti, Batti”—she only wanted to know what her audience liked.

Her father looked round at the company, delighting in their admiration. Her mother sat, like a Niobe before her troubles, with her youngest little girl on her lap, softly beating the child’s hand up and down in time to the music. And Fred, notwithstanding his general scepticism about Rosy, listened to her music with perfect allegiance, wishing he could do the same thing on his flute. It was the pleasantest family party that Lydgate had seen since he came to Middlemarch. The Vincys had the readiness to enjoy, the rejection of all anxiety, and the belief in life as a merry lot which made a house exceptional in most county towns at that time, when evangelicalism had cast a certain suspicion as of plague-infection over the few amusements which survived in the provinces. At the Vincys’ there was always whist, and the card-tables stood ready now, making some of the company secretly impatient of the music. Before it ceased Mr. Farebrother came in—a handsome, broad-chested, but otherwise small man, about forty, whose black was very threadbare: the brilliancy was all in his quick grey eyes. He came like a pleasant change in the light, arresting little Louisa with fatherly nonsense as she was being led out of the room by Miss Morgan, greeting everybody with some special word and seeming to condense more talk into ten minutes than had been held all through the evening. He claimed from Lydgate the fulfilment of a promise to come and see him. “I can’t let you off, you know, because I have some beetles to show you. We collectors feel an interest in every new man till he has seen all we have to show him.”

But soon he swerved to the whist-table, rubbing his hands and saying, “Come now, let us be serious! Mr. Lydgate? Not play? Ah! You are too young and light for this kind of thing.”

Lydgate said to himself that the clergyman whose abilities were so painful to Mr. Bulstrode appeared to have found an agreeable resort in this certainly not erudite household. He could half understand it: the good humour, the good looks of elder and younger, and the provision for passing the time without any labour of intelligence might make the house beguiling to people who had no particular use for their odd hours.

Everything looked blooming and joyous except Miss Morgan, who was brown, dull, and resigned, and altogether, as Mrs. Vincy often said, just the sort of person for a governess. Lydgate did not mean to pay many such visits himself. They were a wretched waste of the evenings; and now, when he had talked a little more to Rosamond, he meant to excuse himself and go.

“You will not like us at Middlemarch, I feel sure,” she said when the whist-players were settled. “We are very stupid, and you have been used to something quite different.”

“I suppose all country towns are pretty much alike,” said Lydgate. “But I have noticed that one always believes one’s own town to be more stupid than any other. I have made up my mind to take Middlemarch as it comes, and shall be much obliged if the town will take me in the same way. I have certainly found some charms in it which are much greater than I had expected.”

“You mean the rides towards Tipton and Lowick; everyone is pleased with those,” said Rosamond with simplicity.

“No, I mean something much nearer to me.”

Rosamond rose and reached her netting, and then said, “Do you care about dancing at all? I am not quite sure whether clever men ever dance.”

“I would dance with you if you would allow me.”

“Oh!” said Rosamond with a slight deprecatory laugh. “I was only going to say we sometimes have dancing, and I wanted to know whether you would feel insulted if you were asked to come.”

“Not on the condition I mentioned.”

After this chat Lydgate thought that he was going, but on moving towards the whist-tables, he got interested in watching Mr. Farebrother’s play, which was masterly, and also his face, which was a striking mixture of the shrewd and the mild. At ten o’clock supper was brought in (such were the customs of Middlemarch) and there was punch-drinking, but Mr. Farebrother had only a glass of water. He was winning, but there seemed to be no reason why the renewal of rubbers should end, and Lydgate at last took his leave.

But as it was not eleven o'clock, he chose to walk in the brisk air towards the tower of St. Botolph's, Mr. Farebrother's church, which stood out dark, square, and massive against the starlight. It was the oldest church in Middlemarch; the living, however, was but a vicarage worth barely four hundred a year. Lydgate had heard that, and he wondered now whether Mr. Farebrother cared about the money he won at cards, thinking, "He seems a very pleasant fellow, but Bulstrode may have his good reasons." Many things would be easier to Lydgate if it should turn out that Mr. Bulstrode was generally justifiable. "What is his religious doctrine to me if he carries some good notions along with it? One must use such brains as are to be found."

These were actually Lydgate's first meditations as he walked away from Mr. Vincy's, and on this ground I fear that many ladies will consider him hardly worthy of their attention. He thought of Rosamond and her music only in the second place; and though when her turn came he dwelt on the image of her for the rest of his walk, he felt no agitation and had no sense that any new current had set into his life. He could not marry yet; he wished not to marry for several years; and therefore he was not ready to entertain the notion of being in love with a girl whom he happened to admire. He did admire Rosamond exceedingly, but that madness which had once beset him about Laure was not, he thought, likely to recur in relation to any other woman. Certainly, if falling in love had been at all in question, it would have been quite safe with a creature like this Miss Vincy, who had just the kind of intelligence one would desire in a woman—polished, refined, docile, lending itself to finish in all the delicacies of life, and enshrined in a body which expressed this with a force of demonstration that excluded the need for other evidence. Lydgate felt sure that if he ever married, his wife would have that feminine radiance, that distinctive womanhood which must be classed with flowers and music, that sort of beauty which by its very nature was virtuous, being moulded only for pure and delicate joys.

But since he did not mean to marry for the next five years—his more pressing business was to look into Louis's new book on fever, which he was specially interested in because he had known Louis in Paris and had followed many anatomical demonstrations in order to ascertain the specific differences of typhus and typhoid. He went home and read far into the smallest hour, bringing a much more testing vision of details and relations into this pathological study than he had ever thought it necessary to apply to the complexities of love and marriage, these being subjects on which he felt himself amply informed by literature and that traditional wisdom which is handed down in the genial conversation of men. Whereas fever had obscure conditions and gave him that delightful labour of the imagination which is not mere arbitrariness, but the exercise of disciplined power—combining and constructing with the clearest eye for probabilities and the fullest obedience to knowledge; and then, in yet more energetic alliance with impartial Nature, standing aloof to invent tests by which to try its own work.

Many men have been praised as vividly imaginative on the strength of their profuseness in indifferent drawing or cheap narration—reports of very poor talk going on in distant orbs, or portraits of Lucifer coming down on his bad errands as a large ugly man with bat's wings and spurts of phosphorescence, or exaggerations of wantonness that seem to reflect life in a diseased dream. But these kinds of inspiration Lydgate regarded as rather vulgar and vinous compared with the imagination that reveals subtle actions inaccessible by any sort of lens, but tracked in that outer darkness through long pathways of necessary sequence by the inward light which is the last refinement of energy, capable of bathing even the ethereal atoms in its ideally illuminated space. He for his part had tossed away all cheap inventions where ignorance finds itself able and at ease; he was enamoured of that arduous invention which is the very eye of research, provisionally framing its object and correcting it to more and more exactness of relation; he wanted to pierce the obscurity of those minute processes which prepare human misery and joy, those invisible thoroughfares which are the first lurking-places of anguish, mania, and crime, that delicate poise and transition which determine the growth of happy or unhappy consciousness.

As he threw down his book, stretched his legs towards the embers in the grate, and clasped his hands at the back of his head, in that agreeable after-glow of excitement when thought lapses from examination of a specific object into a suffusive sense of its connexions with all the rest of our existence—seems, as it were, to throw itself on its back after vigorous swimming and float with the repose of unexhausted strength—Lydgate felt a triumphant delight in his studies and something like pity for those less lucky men who were not of his profession.

"If I had not taken that turn when I was a lad," he thought, "I might have got into some stupid draught-horse work or other and lived always in blinkers. I should never have been happy in any profession that did not call forth the highest intellectual strain and yet keep me in good warm contact with my neighbours. There is nothing like the medical profession for that; one can have the exclusive scientific life that touches the distance and befriend the old fogies in the parish too. It is rather harder for a clergyman: Farebrother seems to be an anomaly."

This last thought brought back the Vincys and all the pictures of the evening. They floated in his mind agreeably enough, and as he took up his bed-candle his lips were curled with that incipient smile which is apt to accompany agreeable recollections. He was an ardent fellow, but at present his ardour was absorbed in love of his work and in the ambition of making his life recognized as a factor in the better life of mankind—like other heroes of science who had nothing but an obscure country practice to begin with.

Poor Lydgate! Or shall I say poor Rosamond! Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing. It had not occurred to Lydgate that he had been a subject of eager meditation to Rosamond, who had neither any reason for throwing her marriage into distant perspective nor any pathological studies to divert her mind from that ruminating habit, that inward repetition of looks, words, and phrases, which makes a large part in the lives of most girls. He had not meant to look at her or speak to her with more than the inevitable amount of admiration and compliment which a man must give to a beautiful girl; indeed, it seemed to him that his enjoyment of her music had remained almost silent, for he feared falling into the rudeness of telling her his great surprise at her possession of such accomplishment. But Rosamond had registered every look and word and estimated them as the opening incidents of a preconceived romance—incidents which gather value from the foreseen development and climax. In Rosamond's romance it was not necessary to imagine much about the inward life of the hero or of his serious business in the world; of course, he had a profession and was clever as well as sufficiently handsome, but the piquant fact about Lydgate was his good birth, which distinguished him from all Middlemarch admirers

and presented marriage as a prospect of rising in rank and getting a little nearer to that celestial condition on earth in which she would have nothing to do with vulgar people, and perhaps at last associate with relatives quite equal to the county people who looked down on the Middlemarchers. It was part of Rosamond's cleverness to discern very subtly the faintest aroma of rank, and once when she had seen the Miss Brookes accompanying their uncle at the county assizes, and seated among the aristocracy, she had envied them, notwithstanding their plain dress.

If you think it incredible that to imagine Lydgate as a man of family could cause thrills of satisfaction which had anything to do with the sense that she was in love with him, I will ask you to use your power of comparison a little more effectively and consider whether red cloth and epaulets have never had an influence of that sort. Our passions do not live apart in locked chambers, but, dressed in their small wardrobe of notions, bring their provisions to a common table and mess together, feeding out of the common store according to their appetite.

Rosamond, in fact, was entirely occupied not exactly with Tertius Lydgate as he was in himself, but with his relation to her; and it was excusable in a girl who was accustomed to hear that all young men might, could, would be, or actually were in love with her to believe at once that Lydgate could be no exception. His looks and words meant more to her than other men's because she cared more for them; she thought of them diligently and diligently attended to that perfection of appearance, behaviour, sentiments, and all other elegancies which would find in Lydgate a more adequate admirer than she had yet been conscious of.

For Rosamond, though she would never do anything that was disagreeable to her, was industrious; and now more than ever she was active in sketching her landscapes and market-carts and portraits of friends, in practising her music, and in being from morning till night her own standard of a perfect lady, having always an audience in her own consciousness, with sometimes the not unwelcome addition of a more variable external audience in the numerous visitors of the house. She found time also to read the best novels, and even the second best, and she knew much poetry by heart. Her favourite poem was "Lalla Rookh."

"The best girl in the world! He will be a happy fellow who gets her!" was the sentiment of the elderly gentlemen who visited the Vincys; and the rejected young men thought of trying again, as is the fashion in country towns where the horizon is not thick with coming rivals. But Mrs. Plymdale thought that Rosamond had been educated to a ridiculous pitch, for what was the use of accomplishments which would be all laid aside as soon as she was married? While her aunt Bulstrode, who had a sisterly faithfulness towards her brother's family, had two sincere wishes for Rosamond—that she might show a more serious turn of mind and that she might meet with a husband whose wealth corresponded to her habits.

CHAPTER 17

The clerkly person smiled and said,
Promise was a pretty maid,
But being poor she died unwed.

The Rev. Camden Farebrother, whom Lydgate went to see the next evening, lived in an old parsonage, built of stone, venerable enough to match the church which it looked out upon. All the furniture too in the house was old, but with another grade of age—that of Mr. Farebrother's father and grandfather. There were painted white chairs with gilding and wreaths on them, and some lingering red silk damask with slits in it. There were engraved portraits of lord chancellors and other celebrated lawyers of the last century; and there were old pier-glasses to reflect them, as well as the little satinwood tables and the sofas resembling a prolongation of uneasy chairs, all standing in relief against the dark wainscot. This was the physiognomy of the drawing-room into which Lydgate was shown; and there were three ladies to receive him, who were also old-fashioned and of a faded but genuine respectability: Mrs. Farebrother, the vicar's white-haired mother, befrilled and kerchiefed with dainty cleanliness, upright, quick-eyed, and still under seventy; Miss Noble, her sister, a tiny old lady of meeker aspect, with frills and kerchief decidedly more worn and mended; and Miss Winifred Farebrother, the vicar's elder sister, well-looking like himself, but nipped and subdued as single women are apt to be who spend their lives in uninterrupted subjection to their elders. Lydgate had not expected to see so quaint a group; knowing simply that Mr. Farebrother was a bachelor, he had thought of being ushered into a snuggery where the chief furniture would probably be books and collections of natural objects. The vicar himself seemed to wear rather a changed aspect, as most men do when acquaintances made elsewhere see them for the first time in their own homes, some indeed showing like an actor of genial parts disadvantageously cast for the curmudgeon in a new piece. This was not the case with Mr. Farebrother: he seemed a trifle milder and more silent, the chief talker being the mother, while he only put in a good-humoured moderating remark here and there. The old lady was evidently accustomed to tell her company what they ought to think and to regard no subject as quite safe without her steering. She was afforded leisure for this function by having all her little wants attended to by Miss Winifred. Meanwhile tiny Miss Noble carried on her arm a small basket, into which she diverted a bit of sugar which she had first dropped in her saucer as if by mistake, looking round furtively afterwards and reverting to her tea-cup with a small innocent noise as of a tiny, timid quadruped. Pray think no ill of Miss Noble. That basket held small savings from her more portable food, destined for the children of her poor friends among whom she trotted on fine mornings, fostering and petting all needy creatures being so spontaneous a delight to her that she regarded it much as if it had been a pleasant vice that she was addicted to. Perhaps she was conscious of being tempted to steal from those who had much that she might give to those who had nothing and carried in her conscience the guilt of that repressed desire. One must be poor to know the luxury of giving!

Mrs. Farebrother welcomed the guest with a lively formality and precision. She presently informed him that they were not often in want of medical aid in the house. She had brought up her children to wear flannel and not to over-eat themselves, which last habit she considered the chief reason why people needed doctors. Lydgate pleaded for those whose fathers and mothers have over-eaten themselves, but Mrs. Farebrother held that view of things dangerous: Nature was more just than that; it would be easy for any felon to say that his ancestors ought to have been hanged instead of him. If those who had bad fathers and mothers were bad themselves, they were hanged for that. There was no need to go back on what you couldn't see.

"My mother is like old George the Third," said the vicar; "she objects to metaphysics."

"I object to what is wrong, Camden. I say, keep hold of a few plain truths and make everything square with them. When I was young, Mr. Lydgate, there never was any question about right and wrong. We knew our catechism, and that was enough; we learned our creed and our duty. Every respectable Church person had the same opinions. But now, if you speak out of the prayer-book itself, you are liable to be contradicted."

"That makes rather a pleasant time of it for those who like to maintain their own point," said Lydgate.

"But my mother always gives way," said the vicar slyly.

"No, no, Camden, you must not lead Mr. Lydgate into a mistake about *me*. I shall never show that disrespect to my parents, to give up what they taught me. Anyone may see what comes of turning. If you change once, why not twenty times?"

"A man might see good arguments for changing once and not see them for changing again," said Lydgate, amused with the decisive old lady.

"Excuse me there. If you go upon arguments, they are never wanting when a man has no constancy of mind. My father never changed, and he preached plain moral sermons without arguments, and was a good man—few better. When you get me a good man made out of arguments, I will get you a good dinner with reading you the cookery-book. That's my opinion, and I think anybody's stomach will bear me out."

"About the dinner certainly, Mother," said Mr. Farebrother.

"It is the same thing, the dinner or the man. I am nearly seventy, Mr. Lydgate, and I go upon experience. I am not likely

to follow new lights, though there are plenty of them here as elsewhere. I say, they came in with the mixed stuffs that will neither wash nor wear. It was not so in my youth: a Churchman was a Churchman, and a clergyman, you might be pretty sure, was a gentleman, if nothing else. But now he may be no better than a dissenter and want to push aside my son on pretence of doctrine. But whoever may wish to push him aside, I am proud to say, Mr. Lydgate, that he will compare with any preacher in this kingdom, not to speak of this town, which is but a low standard to go by; at least, to my thinking, for I was born and bred at Exeter."

"A mother is never partial," said Mr. Farebrother, smiling. "What do you think Tyke's mother says about him?"

"Ah, poor creature! What indeed?" said Mrs. Farebrother, her sharpness blunted for the moment by her confidence in maternal judgements. "She says the truth to herself, depend upon it."

"And what is the truth?" said Lydgate. "I am curious to know."

"Oh, nothing bad at all," said Mr. Farebrother. "He is a zealous fellow: not very learned, and not very wise, I think—because I don't agree with him."

"Why, Camden!" said Miss Winifred. "Griffin and his wife told me only today that Mr. Tyke said they should have no more coals if they came to hear you preach."

Mrs. Farebrother laid down her knitting, which she had resumed after her small allowance of tea and toast, and looked at her son as if to say "You hear that?" Miss Noble said, "Oh, poor things! Poor things!" in reference, probably, to the double loss of preaching and coal. But the vicar answered quietly, "That is because they are not my parishioners. And I don't think my sermons are worth a load of coals to them."

"Mr. Lydgate," said Mrs. Farebrother, who could not let this pass, "you don't know my son: he always undervalues himself. I tell him he is undervaluing the God who made him, and made him a most excellent preacher."

"That must be a hint for me to take Mr. Lydgate away to my study, Mother," said the vicar, laughing. "I promised to show you my collection," he added, turning to Lydgate; "shall we go?"

All three ladies remonstrated. Mr. Lydgate ought not to be hurried away without being allowed to accept another cup of tea; Miss Winifred had abundance of good tea in the pot. Why was Camden in such haste to take a visitor to his den? There was nothing but pickled vermin and drawers full of blue-bottles and moths, with no carpet on the floor. Mr. Lydgate must excuse it. A game at cribbage would be far better. In short, it was plain that a vicar might be adored by his womankind as the king of men and preachers, and yet be held by them to stand in much need of their direction. Lydgate, with the usual shallowness of a young bachelor, wondered that Mr. Farebrother had not taught them better.

"My mother is not used to my having visitors who can take any interest in my hobbies," said the vicar as he opened the door of his study, which was indeed as bare of luxuries for the body as the ladies had implied, unless a short porcelain pipe and a tobacco-box were to be excepted.

"Men of your profession don't generally smoke," he said. Lydgate smiled and shook his head. "Nor of mine either, properly, I suppose. You will hear that pipe alleged against me by Bulstrode and Company. They don't know how pleased the Devil would be if I gave it up."

"I understand. You are of an excitable temper and want a sedative. I am heavier and should get idle with it. I should rush into idleness and stagnate there with all my might."

"And you mean to give it all to your work. I am some ten or twelve years older than you and have come to a compromise. I feed a weakness or two lest they should get clamorous. See," continued the vicar, opening several small drawers, "I fancy I have made an exhaustive study of the entomology of this district. I am going on both with the fauna and flora, but I have at least done my insects well. We are singularly rich in orthoptera: I don't know whether—Ah! You have got hold of that glass jar—you are looking into that instead of my drawers. You don't really care about these things?"

"Not by the side of this lovely anencephalous monster. I have never had time to give myself much to natural history. I was early bitten with an interest in structure, and it is what lies most directly in my profession. I have no hobby besides. I have the sea to swim in there."

"Ah! You are a happy fellow," said Mr. Farebrother, turning on his heel and beginning to fill his pipe. "You don't know what it is to want spiritual tobacco—bad emendations of old texts or small items about a variety of *Aphis brassicae*, with the well-known signature of Philomicron, for the *Twaddler's Magazine*; or a learned treatise on the entomology of the Pentateuch, including all the insects not mentioned, but probably met with by the Israelites in their passage through the desert; with a monograph on the ant, as treated by Solomon, showing the harmony of the book of Proverbs with the results of modern research. You don't mind my fumigating you?"

Lydgate was more surprised at the openness of this talk than at its implied meaning—that the vicar felt himself not altogether in the right vocation. The neat fitting-up of drawers and shelves and the bookcase filled with expensive illustrated books on natural history made him think again of the winnings at cards and their destination. But he was beginning to wish that the very best construction of everything that Mr. Farebrother did should be the true one. The vicar's frankness seemed not of the repulsive sort that comes from an uneasy consciousness seeking to forestall the judgement of others, but simply the relief of a desire to do with as little pretence as possible.

Apparently he was not without a sense that his freedom of speech might seem premature, for he presently said, "I have not yet told you that I have the advantage of you, Mr. Lydgate, and know you better than you know me. You remember Trawley, who shared your apartment at Paris for some time? I was a correspondent of his, and he told me a good deal about you. I was not quite sure when you first came that you were the same man. I was very glad when I found that you were. Only I don't forget that you have not had the like prologue about me."

Lydgate divined some delicacy of feeling here, but did not half understand it. "By the way," he said, "what has become of Trawley? I have quite lost sight of him. He was hot on the French social systems and talked of going to the backwoods to found a sort of Pythagorean community. Is he gone?"

"Not at all. He is practising at a German bath and has married a rich patient."

"Then my notions wear the best, so far," said Lydgate with a short, scornful laugh. "He would have it the medical profession was an inevitable system of humbug. I said the fault was in the men—men who truckle to lies and folly. Instead

of preaching against humbug outside the walls, it might be better to set up a disinfecting apparatus within. In short—I am reporting my own conversation—you may be sure I had all the good sense on my side."

"Your scheme is a good deal more difficult to carry out than the Pythagorean community, though. You have not only got the old Adam in yourself against you, but you have got all those descendants of the original Adam, who form the society around you. You see, I have paid twelve or thirteen years more than you for my knowledge of difficulties. But—" Mr. Farebrother broke off a moment, and then added, "You are eyeing that glass vase again. Do you want to make an exchange? You shall not have it without a fair barter."

"I have some sea-mice—fine specimens—in spirits. And I will throw in Robert Brown's new thing—*Microscopic Observations on the Pollen of Plants*—if you don't happen to have it already."

"Why, seeing how you long for the monster, I might ask a higher price. Suppose I ask you to look through my drawers and agree with me about all my new species?" The vicar, while he talked in this way, alternately moved about with his pipe in his mouth and returned to hang rather fondly over his drawers. "That would be good discipline, you know, for a young doctor who has to please his patients in Middlemarch. You must learn to be bored, remember. However, you shall have the monster on your own terms."

"Don't you think men overrate the necessity for humouring everybody's nonsense till they get despised by the very fools they humour?' said Lydgate, moving to Mr. Farebrother's side and looking rather absently at the insects ranged in fine gradation, with names subscribed in exquisite writing. "The shortest way is to make your value felt so that people must put up with you whether you flatter them or not."

"With all my heart. But then you must be sure of having the value, and you must keep yourself independent. Very few men can do that. Either you slip out of service altogether and become good for nothing or you wear the harness and draw a good deal where your yoke-fellows pull you. But do look at these delicate orthoptera!"

Lydgate had after all to give some scrutiny to each drawer, the vicar laughing at him and yet persisting in the exhibition.

"Apropos of what you said about wearing harness," Lydgate began after they had sat down, "I made up my mind some time ago to do with as little of it as possible. That was why I determined not to try anything in London, for a good many years at least. I didn't like what I saw when I was studying there—so much empty bigwiggism and obstructive trickery. In the country, people have less pretension to knowledge and are less of companions, but for that reason they affect one's *amour-propre* less: one makes less bad blood and can follow one's own course more quietly."

"Yes—well—you have got a good start; you are in the right profession, the work you feel yourself most fit for. Some people miss that, and repent too late. But you must not be too sure of keeping your independence."

"You mean of family ties?" said Lydgate, conceiving that these might press rather tightly on Mr. Farebrother.

"Not altogether. Of course they make many things more difficult. But a good wife—a good, unworldly woman—may really help a man and keep him more independent. There's a parishioner of mine—a fine fellow, but who would hardly have pulled through as he has done without his wife. Do you know the Garths? I think they were not Peacock's patients."

"No, but there is a Miss Garth at old Featherstone's at Lowick."

"Their daughter: an excellent girl."

"She is very quiet; I have hardly noticed her."

"She has taken notice of you, though, depend upon it."

"I don't understand," said Lydgate; he could hardly say, "Of course."

"Oh, she gauges everybody. I prepared her for confirmation; she is a favourite of mine."

Mr. Farebrother puffed a few moments in silence, Lydgate not caring to know more about the Garths. At last the vicar laid down his pipe, stretched out his legs, and turned his bright eyes with a smile towards Lydgate, saying, "But we Middlemarchers are not so tame as you take us to be. We have our intrigues and our parties. I am a party man, for example, and Bulstrode is another. If you vote for me you will offend Bulstrode."

"What is there against Bulstrode?" said Lydgate emphatically.

"I did not say there was anything against him except that if you vote against him you will make him your enemy."

"I don't know that I need mind about that," said Lydgate rather proudly; "but he seems to have good ideas about hospitals, and he spends large sums on useful public objects. He might help me a good deal in carrying out my ideas. As to his religious notions—why, as Voltaire said, incantations will destroy a flock of sheep if administered with a certain quantity of arsenic. I look for the man who will bring the arsenic, and don't mind about his incantations."

"Very good. But then you must not offend your arsenic-man. You will not offend me, you know," said Mr. Farebrother quite unaffectedly. "I don't translate my own convenience into other people's duties. I am opposed to Bulstrode in many ways. I don't like the set he belongs to: they are a narrow, ignorant set and do more to make their neighbours uncomfortable than to make them better. Their system is a sort of worldly-spiritual cliqueism: they really look on the rest of mankind as a doomed carcass which is to nourish them for heaven. But," he added smilingly, "I don't say that Bulstrode's new hospital is a bad thing; and as to his wanting to oust me from the old one—why, if he thinks me a mischievous fellow, he is only returning a compliment. And I am not a model clergyman, only a decent makeshift."

Lydgate was not at all sure that the vicar maligned himself. A model clergyman, like a model doctor, ought to think his own profession is the finest in the world and take all knowledge as mere nourishment to his moral pathology and therapeutics. He only said, "What reason does Bulstrode give for superseding you?"

"That I don't teach his opinions, which he calls spiritual religion, and that I have no time to spare. Both statements are true. But then I could make time, and I should be glad of the forty pounds. That is the plain fact of the case. But let us dismiss it. I only wanted to tell you that if you vote for your arsenic-man, you are not to cut me in consequence. I can't spare you. You are a sort of circumnavigator come to settle among us, and will keep up my belief in the antipodes. Now tell me all about them in Paris."

CHAPTER 18

Oh, sir, the loftiest hopes on earth
Draw lots with meaner hopes: heroic breasts,
Breathing bad air, run risk of pestilence;
Or, lacking lime-juice when they cross the Line,
May languish with the scurvy.

Some weeks passed after this conversation before the question of the chaplaincy gathered any practical import for Lydgate, and without telling himself the reason, he deferred the predetermination on which side he should give his vote. It would really have been a matter of total indifference to him—that is to say, he would have taken the more convenient side and given his vote for the appointment of Tyke without any hesitation—if he had not cared personally for Mr. Farebrother.

But his liking for the vicar of St. Botolph's grew with growing acquaintanceship. That, entering into Lydgate's position as a newcomer who had his own professional objects to secure, Mr. Farebrother should have taken pains rather to warn off than to obtain his interest, showed an unusual delicacy and generosity, which Lydgate's nature was keenly alive to. It went along with other points of conduct in Mr. Farebrother which were exceptionally fine and made his character resemble those southern landscapes which seem divided between natural grandeur and social slovenliness. Very few men could have been as filial and chivalrous as he was to the mother, aunt, and sister, whose dependence on him had in many ways shaped his life rather uneasily for himself; few men who feel the pressure of small needs are so nobly resolute not to dress up their inevitably self-interested desires in a pretext of better motives. In these matters he was conscious that his life would bear the closest scrutiny, and perhaps the consciousness encouraged a little defiance towards the critical strictness of persons whose celestial intimacies seemed not to improve their domestic manners and whose lofty aims were not needed to account for their actions. Then, his preaching was ingenious and pithy like the preaching of the English Church in its robust age, and his sermons were delivered without book. People outside his parish went to hear him; and since to fill the church was always the most difficult part of a clergyman's function, here was another ground for a careless sense of superiority. Besides, he was a likeable man: sweet-tempered, ready-witted, frank, without grins of suppressed bitterness or other conversational flavours which make half of us an affliction to our friends. Lydgate liked him heartily and wished for his friendship.

With this feeling uppermost, he continued to waive the question of the chaplaincy and to persuade himself that it was not only no proper business of his, but likely enough never to vex him with a demand for his vote. Lydgate, at Mr. Bulstrode's request, was laying down plans for the internal arrangements of the new hospital, and the two were often in consultation. The banker was always presupposing that he could count in general on Lydgate as a co-adjutor, but made no special recurrence to the coming decision between Tyke and Farebrother. When the General Board of the Infirmary had met, however, and Lydgate had notice that the question of the chaplaincy was thrown on a council of the directors and medical men, to meet on the following Friday, he had a vexed sense that he must make up his mind on this trivial Middlemarch business. He could not help hearing within him the distinct declaration that Bulstrode was prime minister and that the Tyke affair was a question of office or no office, and he could not help an equally pronounced dislike to giving up the prospect of office. For his observation was constantly confirming Mr. Farebrother's assurance that the banker would not overlook opposition. "Confound their petty politics!" was one of his thoughts for three mornings in the meditative process of shaving, when he had begun to feel that he must really hold a court of conscience on this matter. Certainly there were valid things to be said against the election of Mr. Farebrother: he had too much on his hands already, especially considering how much time he spent on non-clerical occupations. Then again it was a continually repeated shock, disturbing Lydgate's esteem, that the vicar should obviously play for the sake of money, liking the play indeed, but evidently liking some end which it served. Mr. Farebrother contended on theory for the desirability of all games and said that Englishmen's wit was stagnant for want of them; but Lydgate felt certain that he would have played very much less but for the money. There was a billiard-room at the Green Dragon, which some anxious mothers and wives regarded as the chief temptation in Middlemarch. The vicar was a first-rate billiard-player, and though he did not frequent the Green Dragon, there were reports that he had sometimes been there in the daytime and had won money. And as to the chaplaincy, he did not pretend that he cared for it, except for the sake of the forty pounds. Lydgate was no puritan, but he did not care for play, and winning money at it had always seemed a meanness to him; besides, he had an ideal of life which made this subservience of conduct to the gaining of small sums thoroughly hateful to him. Hitherto in his own life his wants had been supplied without any trouble to himself, and his first impulse was always to be liberal with half-crowns as matters of no importance to a gentleman; it had never occurred to him to devise a plan for getting half-crowns. He had always known in a general way that he was not rich, but he had never felt poor, and he had no power of imagining the part which the want of money plays in determining the actions of men. Money had never been a motive to him. Hence he was not ready to frame excuses for this deliberate pursuit of small gains. It was altogether repulsive to him, and he never entered into any calculation of the ratio between the vicar's income and his more or less necessary expenditure. It was possible that he would not have made such a calculation in his own case.

And now, when the question of voting had come, this repulsive fact told more strongly against Mr. Farebrother than it

had done before. One would know much better what to do if men's characters were more consistent, and especially if one's friends were invariably fit for any function they desired to undertake! Lydgate was convinced that if there had been no valid objection to Mr. Farebrother, he would have voted for him, whatever Bulstrode might have felt on the subject: he did not intend to be a vassal of Bulstrode's. On the other hand, there was Tyke, a man entirely given to his clerical office, who was simply curate at a chapel of ease in St. Peter's parish and had time for extra duty. Nobody had anything to say against Mr. Tyke except that they could not bear him and suspected him of cant. Really, from his point of view, Bulstrode was thoroughly justified.

But whichever way Lydgate began to incline, there was something to make him wince; and being a proud man, he was a little exasperated at being obliged to wince. He did not like frustrating his own best purposes by getting on bad terms with Bulstrode; he did not like voting against Farebrother and helping to deprive him of function and salary; and the question occurred whether the additional forty pounds might not leave the vicar free from that ignoble care about winning at cards. Moreover, Lydgate did not like the consciousness that in voting for Tyke he should be voting on the side obviously convenient for himself. But would the end really be his own convenience? Other people would say so and would allege that he was currying favour with Bulstrode for the sake of making himself important and getting on in the world. What then? He for his own part knew that if his personal prospects simply had been concerned, he would not have cared a rotten nut for the banker's friendship or enmity. What he really cared for was a medium for his work, a vehicle for his ideas; and after all, was he not bound to prefer the object of getting a good hospital where he could demonstrate the specific distinctions of fever and test therapeutic results before anything else connected with this chaplaincy? For the first time Lydgate was feeling the hampering, threadlike pressure of small social conditions and their frustrating complexity. At the end of his inward debate, when he set out for the hospital, his hope was really in the chance that discussion might somehow give a new aspect to the question and make the scale dip so as to exclude the necessity for voting. I think he trusted a little also to the energy which is begotten by circumstances—some feeling rushing warmly and making resolve easy, while debate in cool blood had only made it more difficult. However it was, he did not distinctly say to himself on which side he would vote, and all the while he was inwardly resenting the subjection which had been forced upon him. It would have seemed beforehand like a ridiculous piece of bad logic that he, with his unmixed resolutions of independence and his select purposes, would find himself at the very outset in the grasp of petty alternatives, each of which was repugnant to him. In his student's chambers, he had prearranged his social action quite differently.

Lydgate was late in setting out, but Dr. Sprague, the two other surgeons, and several of the directors had arrived early, Mr. Bulstrode, treasurer and chairman, being among those who were still absent. The conversation seemed to imply that the issue was problematical and that a majority for Tyke was not so certain as had been generally supposed. The two physicians, for a wonder, turned out to be unanimous, or rather, though of different minds, they concurred in action. Dr. Sprague, the rugged and weighty, was, as everyone had foreseen, an adherent of Mr. Farebrother. The doctor was more than suspected of having no religion, but somehow Middlemarch tolerated this deficiency in him as if he had been a lord chancellor; indeed it is probable that his professional weight was the more believed in, the world-old association of cleverness with the evil principle being still potent in the minds even of lady patients who had the strictest ideas of frilling and sentiment. It was perhaps this negation in the doctor which made his neighbours call him hard-headed and dry-witted, conditions of texture which were also held favourable to the storing of judgements connected with drugs. At all events, it is certain that if any medical man had come to Middlemarch with the reputation of having very definite religious views, of being given to prayer, and of otherwise showing an active piety, there would have been a general presumption against his medical skill.

On this ground it was (professionally speaking) fortunate for Dr. Minchin that his religious sympathies were of a general kind and such as gave a distant medical sanction to all serious sentiment, whether of Church or dissent, rather than any adhesion to particular tenets. If Mr. Bulstrode insisted, as he was apt to do, on the Lutheran doctrine of justification as that by which a Church must stand or fall, Dr. Minchin in return was quite sure that man was not a mere machine or a fortuitous conjunction of atoms; if Mrs. Wimple insisted on a particular providence in relation to her stomach complaint, Dr. Minchin for his part liked to keep the mental windows open and objected to fixed limits; if the Unitarian brewer jested about the Athanasian Creed, Dr. Minchin quoted Pope's *Essay on Man*. He objected to the rather free style of anecdote in which Dr. Sprague indulged, preferring well-sanctioned quotations and liking refinement of all kinds: it was generally known that he had some kinship to a bishop and sometimes spent his holidays at "the palace."

Dr. Minchin was soft-handed, pale-complexioned, and of rounded outline, not to be distinguished from a mild clergyman in appearance, whereas Dr. Sprague was superfluously tall; his trousers got creased at the knees and showed an excess of boot at a time when straps seemed necessary to any dignity of bearing; you heard him go in and out, and up and down, as if he had come to see after the roofing. In short, he had weight and might be expected to grapple with a disease and throw it, while Dr. Minchin might be better able to detect it lurking and to circumvent it. They enjoyed about equally the mysterious privilege of medical reputation and concealed with much etiquette their contempt for each other's skill. Regarding themselves as Middlemarch institutions, they were ready to combine against all innovators and against non-professionals given to interference. On this ground they were both in their hearts equally averse to Mr. Bulstrode, though Dr. Minchin had never been in open hostility with him and never differed from him without elaborate explanation to Mrs. Bulstrode, who had found that Dr. Minchin alone understood her constitution. A layman who pried into the professional conduct of medical men and was always obtruding his reforms, though he was less directly embarrassing to the two physicians than to the surgeon-apothecaries who attended paupers by contract, was nevertheless offensive to the professional nostril as such; and Dr. Minchin shared fully in the new pique against Bulstrode, excited by his apparent determination to patronize Lydgate. The long-established practitioners, Mr. Wrench and Mr. Toller, were just now standing apart and having a friendly colloquy, in which they agreed that Lydgate was a jackanapes, just made to serve Bulstrode's purpose. To non-medical friends they had already concurred in praising the other young practitioner, who had come into the town on Mr. Peacock's retirement without further recommendation than his own merits and such argument for solid professional acquirement as might be gathered from his having apparently wasted no time on other branches of knowledge.

It was clear that Lydgate, by not dispensing drugs, intended to cast imputations on his equals and also to obscure the limit between his own rank as a general practitioner and that of the physicians who, in the interest of the profession, felt bound to maintain its various grades. Especially against a man who had not been to either of the English universities and enjoyed the absence of anatomical and bedside study there, but came with a libellous pretension to experience in Edinburgh and Paris, where observation might be abundant indeed, but hardly sound.

Thus it happened that on this occasion Bulstrode became identified with Lydgate, and Lydgate with Tyke; and owing to this variety of interchangeable names for the chaplaincy question, diverse minds were enabled to form the same judgement concerning it.

Dr. Sprague said at once bluntly to the group assembled when he entered, "I go for Farebrother. A salary, with all my heart. But why take it from the vicar? He has none too much—has to insure his life, besides keeping house, and doing a vicar's charities. Put forty pounds in his pocket and you'll do no harm. He's a good fellow, is Farebrother, with as little of the parson about him as will serve to carry orders."

"Ho, ho! doctor," said old Mr. Powderell, a retired ironmonger of some standing—his interjection being something between a laugh and a parliamentary disapproval. "We must let you have your say. But what we have to consider is not anybody's income—it's the souls of the poor sick people." Here Mr. Powderell's voice and face had a sincere pathos in them. "He is a real Gospel preacher, is Mr. Tyke. I should vote against my conscience if I voted against Mr. Tyke—I should indeed."

"Mr. Tyke's opponents have not asked anyone to vote against his conscience, I believe," said Mr. Hackbutt, a rich tanner of fluent speech whose glittering spectacles and erect hair were turned with some severity towards innocent Mr. Powderell. "But in my judgement it behoves us, as directors, to consider whether we will regard it as our whole business to carry out propositions emanating from a single quarter. Will any member of the committee aver that he would have entertained the idea of displacing the gentleman who has always discharged the function of chaplain here if it had not been suggested to him by parties whose disposition it is to regard every institution of this town as a machinery for carrying out their own views? I tax no man's motives: let them lie between himself and a higher power; but I do say that there are influences at work here which are incompatible with genuine independence and that a crawling servility is usually dictated by circumstances which gentlemen so conducting themselves could not afford either morally or financially to avow. I myself am a layman but I have given no inconsiderable attention to the divisions in the Church and—"

"Oh, damn the divisions!" burst in Mr. Frank Hawley, lawyer and town-clerk, who rarely presented himself at the board, but now looked in hurriedly, whip in hand. "We have nothing to do with them here. Farebrother has been doing the work—what there was—without pay, and if pay is to be given, it should be given to him. I call it a confounded job to take the thing away from Farebrother."

"I think it would be as well for gentlemen not to give their remarks a personal bearing," said Mr. Plymdale. "I shall vote for the appointment of Mr. Tyke, but I should not have known if Mr. Hackbutt hadn't hinted it that I was a servile crawler."

"I disclaim any personalities. I expressly said, if I may be allowed to repeat or even to conclude what I was about to say—"

"Ah, here's Minchin!" said Mr. Frank Hawley. At which everybody turned away from Mr. Hackbutt, leaving him to feel the uselessness of superior gifts in Middlemarch. "Come, doctor, I must have you on the right side, eh?"

"I hope so," said Dr. Minchin, nodding and shaking hands here and there. "At whatever cost to my feelings."

"If there's any feeling here, it should be feeling for the man who is turned out, I think," said Mr. Frank Hawley.

"I confess I have feelings on the other side also. I have a divided esteem," said Dr. Minchin, rubbing his hands. "I consider Mr. Tyke an exemplary man—none more so—and I believe him to be proposed from unimpeachable motives. I, for my part, wish that I could give him my vote. But I am constrained to take a view of the case which gives the preponderance to Mr. Farebrother's claims. He is an amiable man, an able preacher, and has been longer among us."

Old Mr. Powderell looked on, sad and silent. Mr. Plymdale settled his cravat uneasily.

"You don't set up Farebrother as a pattern of what a clergyman ought to be, I hope," said Mr. Larcher, the eminent carrier, who had just come in. "I have no ill will towards him, but I think we owe something to the public, not to speak of anything higher, in these appointments. In my opinion Farebrother is too lax for a clergyman. I don't wish to bring up particulars against him, but he will make a little attendance here go as far as he can."

"And a devilish deal better than too much," said Mr. Hawley, whose bad language was notorious in that part of the county. "Sick people can't bear so much praying and preaching. And that Methodistical sort of religion is bad for the spirits. Bad for the inside, eh?" he added, turning quickly round to the four medical men who were assembled.

But any answer was dispensed with by the entrance of three gentlemen, with whom there were greetings more or less cordial. These were the Reverend Edward Thesiger, rector of St. Peter's; Mr. Bulstrode; and our friend Mr. Brooke of Tipton, who had lately allowed himself to be put on the board of directors in his turn but had never before attended, his attendance now being due to Mr. Bulstrode's exertions. Lydgate was the only person still expected.

Everyone now sat down, Mr. Bulstrode presiding, pale and self-restrained as usual. Mr. Thesiger, a moderate evangelical, wished for the appointment of his friend Mr. Tyke, a zealous, able man who, officiating at a chapel of ease, had not a cure of souls too extensive to leave him ample time for the new duty. It was desirable that chaplaincies of this kind should be entered on with a fervent intention: they were peculiar opportunities for spiritual influence; and while it was good that a salary should be allotted there was the more need for scrupulous watching lest the office should be perverted into a mere question of salary. Mr. Thesiger's manner had so much quiet propriety that objectors could only simmer in silence.

Mr. Brooke believed that everybody meant well in the matter. He had not himself attended to the affairs of the infirmary, though he had a strong interest in whatever was for the benefit of Middlemarch and was most happy to meet the gentlemen present on any public question. "Any public question, you know," Mr. Brooke repeated with his nod of perfect understanding. "I am a good deal occupied as a magistrate, and in the collection of documentary evidence, but I regard my time as being at the disposal of the public, and in short, my friends have convinced me that a chaplain with a salary—a salary, you know—is a very good thing, and I am happy to be able to come here and vote for the appointment of Mr. Tyke,

who, I understand, is an unexceptionable man, apostolic, and eloquent, and everything of that kind, and I am the last man to withhold my vote—under the circumstances, you know."

"It seems to me that you have been crammed with one side of the question, Mr. Brooke," said Mr. Frank Hawley, who was afraid of nobody and was a Tory suspicious of electioneering intentions. "You don't seem to know that one of the worthiest men we have has been doing duty as chaplain here for years without pay and that Mr. Tyke is proposed to supersede him."

"Excuse me, Mr. Hawley," said Mr. Bulstrode. "Mr. Brooke has been fully informed of Mr. Farebrother's character and position."

"By his enemies," flashed out Mr. Hawley.

"I trust there is no personal hostility concerned here," said Mr. Thesiger.

"I'll swear there is, though," retorted Mr. Hawley.

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Bulstrode in a subdued tone, "the merits of the question may be very briefly stated, and if anyone present doubts that every gentleman who is about to give his vote has not been fully informed, I can now recapitulate the considerations that should weigh on either side."

"I don't see the good of that," said Mr. Hawley. "I suppose we all know whom we mean to vote for. Any man who wants to do justice does not wait till the last minute to hear both sides of the question. I have no time to lose, and I propose that the matter be put to the vote at once."

A brief but still hot discussion followed before each person wrote "Tyke" or "Farebrother" on a piece of paper and slipped it into a glass tumbler, and in the meantime Mr. Bulstrode saw Lydgate enter.

"I perceive that the votes are equally divided at present," said Mr. Bulstrode in a clear, biting voice. Then, looking up at Lydgate, "There is a casting-vote still to be given. It is yours, Mr. Lydgate: will you be good enough to write?"

"The thing is settled now," said Mr. Wrench, rising. "We all know how Mr. Lydgate will vote."

"You seem to speak with some peculiar meaning, sir," said Lydgate rather defiantly and keeping his pencil suspended.

"I merely mean that you are expected to vote with Mr. Bulstrode. Do you regard that meaning as offensive?"

"It may be offensive to others. But I shall not desist from voting with him on that account."

Lydgate immediately wrote down "Tyke."

* * *

So the Rev. Walter Tyke became chaplain to the infirmary and Lydgate continued to work with Mr. Bulstrode. He was really uncertain whether Tyke were not the more suitable candidate, and yet his consciousness told him that if he had been quite free from indirect bias he should have voted for Mr. Farebrother. The affair of the chaplaincy remained a sore point in his memory as a case in which this petty medium of Middlemarch had been too strong for him. How could a man be satisfied with a decision between such alternatives and under such circumstances? No more than he can be satisfied with his hat, which he has chosen from among such shapes as the resources of the age offer him, wearing it at best with a resignation which is chiefly supported by comparison.

But Mr. Farebrother met him with the same friendliness as before. The character of the publican and sinner is not always practically incompatible with that of the modern Pharisee, for the majority of us scarcely see more distinctly the faultiness of our own conduct than the faultiness of our own arguments or the dulness of our own jokes. But the vicar of St. Botolph's had certainly escaped the slightest tincture of the Pharisee, and by dint of admitting to himself that he was too much as other men were, he had become remarkably unlike them in this—that he could excuse others for thinking slightly of him and could judge impartially of their conduct even when it told against him.

"The world has been too strong for *me*, I know," he said one day to Lydgate. "But then I am not a mighty man—I shall never be a man of renown. The choice of Hercules is a pretty fable, but Prodicus makes it easy work for the hero as if the first resolves were enough. Another story says that he came to hold the distaff and at last wore the Nessus shirt. I suppose one good resolve might keep a man right if everybody else's resolve helped him."

The vicar's talk was not always inspiriting: he had escaped being a Pharisee, but he had not escaped that low estimate of possibilities which we rather hastily arrive at as an inference from our own failure. Lydgate thought that there was a pitiable infirmity of will in Mr. Farebrother.

CHAPTER 19

L'altra vedete ch'ha fatto alla guancia
Della sua palma, sospirando, letto.

—*Purgatorio*, VII

When George the Fourth was still reigning over the privacies of Windsor, when the Duke of Wellington was prime minister and Mr. Vincy was mayor of the old corporation in Middlemarch, Mrs. Casaubon, born Dorothea Brooke, had taken her wedding journey to Rome. In those days the world in general was more ignorant of good and evil by forty years than it is at present. Travellers did not often carry full information on Christian art either in their heads or their pockets, and even the most brilliant English critic of the day mistook the flower-flushed tomb of the ascended Virgin for an ornamental vase due to the painter's fancy. Romanticism, which has helped to fill some dull blanks with love and knowledge, had not yet penetrated the times with its leaven and entered into everybody's food; it was fermenting still as a distinguishable, vigorous enthusiasm in certain long-haired German artists at Rome, and the youth of other nations who worked or idled near them were sometimes caught in the spreading movement.

One fine morning a young man whose hair was not immoderately long, but abundant and curly, and who was otherwise English in his equipment, had just turned his back on the Belvedere Torso in the Vatican and was looking out on the magnificent view of the mountains from the adjoining round vestibule. He was sufficiently absorbed not to notice the approach of a dark-eyed, animated German who came up to him, and placing a hand on his shoulder, said with a strong accent, "Come here, quick! Else she will have changed her pose."

Quickness was ready at the call, and the two figures passed lightly along by the Meleager towards the hall where the reclining Ariadne, then called the Cleopatra, lies in the marble voluptuousness of her beauty, the drapery folding around her with a petal-like ease and tenderness. They were just in time to see another figure standing against a pedestal near the reclining marble: a breathing, blooming girl whose form, not shamed by the Ariadne, was clad in Quakerish grey drapery; her long cloak, fastened at the neck, was thrown backward from her arms, and one beautiful ungloved hand pillowed her cheek, pushing somewhat backward the white beaver bonnet which made a sort of halo to her face around the simply braided dark-brown hair. She was not looking at the sculpture, probably not thinking of it; her large eyes were fixed dreamily on a streak of sunlight which fell across the floor. But she became conscious of the two strangers who suddenly paused as if to contemplate the Cleopatra, and without looking at them, immediately turned away to join a maid-servant and courier who were loitering along the hall at a little distance off.

"What do you think of that for a fine bit of antithesis?" said the German, searching in his friend's face for responding admiration, but going on volubly without waiting for any other answer. "There lies antique beauty, not corpse-like even in death, but arrested in the complete contentment of its sensuous perfection; and here stands beauty in its breathing life, with the consciousness of Christian centuries in its bosom. But she should be dressed as a nun; I think she looks almost what you call a Quaker; I would dress her as a nun in my picture. However, she is married; I saw her wedding-ring on that wonderful left hand, otherwise I should have thought the sallow *Geistlicher* was her father. I saw him parting from her a good while ago, and just now I found her in that magnificent pose. Only think! He is perhaps rich and would like to have her portrait taken. Ah! It is no use looking after her—there she goes! Let us follow her home!"

"No, no," said his companion with a little frown.

"You are singular, Ladislaw. You look struck together. Do you know her?"

"I know that she is married to my cousin," said Will Ladislaw, sauntering down the hall with a preoccupied air, while his German friend kept at his side and watched him eagerly.

"What, the *Geistlicher*? He looks more like an uncle—a more useful sort of relation."

"He is not my uncle. I tell you he is my second cousin," said Ladislaw with some irritation.

"*Schön, schön*. Don't be snappish. You are not angry with me for thinking Mrs. Second Cousin the most perfect young Madonna I ever saw?"

"Angry? Nonsense. I have only seen her once before, for a couple of minutes when my cousin introduced her to me just before I left England. They were not married then. I didn't know they were coming to Rome."

"But you will go to see them now—you will find out what they have for an address—since you know the name. Shall we go to the post? And you could speak about the portrait."

"Confound you, Naumann! I don't know what I shall do. I am not so brazen as you."

"Bah! That is because you are dilettantish and amateurish. If you were an artist, you would think of Mistress Second Cousin as antique form animated by Christian sentiment—a sort of Christian Antigone—sensuous force controlled by spiritual passion."

"Yes, and that your painting her was the chief outcome of her existence—the divinity passing into higher completeness and all but exhausted in the act of covering your bit of canvas. I am amateurish if you like: I do *not* think that all the universe is straining towards the obscure significance of your pictures."

"But it is, my dear! So far as it is straining through me, Adolf Naumann; that stands firm," said the good-natured painter,

putting a hand on Ladislaw's shoulder, and not in the least disturbed by the unaccountable touch of ill humour in his tone. "See now! My existence presupposes the existence of the whole universe—does it *not*? And my function is to paint, and as a painter I have a conception which is altogether *genialisch* of your great-aunt or second grandmother as a subject for a picture; therefore, the universe is straining towards that picture through that particular hook or claw which it puts forth in the shape of me—not true?"

"But how if another claw in the shape of me is straining to thwart it? The case is a little less simple then."

"Not at all; the result of the struggle is the same thing—picture or no picture—logically." Will could not resist this imperturbable temper, and the cloud in his face broke into sunshiny laughter.

"Come now, my friend—you will help?" said Naumann in a hopeful tone.

"No; nonsense, Naumann! English ladies are not at everybody's service as models. And you want to express too much with your painting. You would only have made a better or worse portrait with a background which every connoisseur would give a different reason for or against. And what is a portrait of a woman? Your painting and Plastik are poor stuff after all. They perturb and dull conceptions instead of raising them. Language is a finer medium."

"Yes, for those who can't paint," said Naumann. "There you have perfect right. I did not recommend you to paint, my friend."

The amiable artist carried his sting, but Ladislaw did not choose to appear stung. He went on as if he had not heard.

"Language gives a fuller image, which is all the better for being vague. After all, the true seeing is within; and painting stares at you with an insistent imperfection. I feel that especially about representations of women. As if a woman were a mere coloured superficies! You must wait for movement and tone. There is a difference in their very breathing; they change from moment to moment. This woman whom you have just seen, for example: how would you paint her voice, pray? But her voice is much diviner than anything you have seen of her."

"I see, I see. You are jealous. No man must presume to think that he can paint your ideal. This is serious, my friend! Your great-aunt! *Der Neffe als Onkel* in a tragic sense—*ungeheuer!*"

"You and I shall quarrel, Naumann, if you call that lady my aunt again."

"How is she to be called then?"

"Mrs. Casaubon."

"Good. Suppose I get acquainted with her in spite of you and find that she very much wishes to be painted?"

"Yes, suppose!" said Will Ladislaw in a contemptuous undertone intended to dismiss the subject. He was conscious of being irritated by ridiculously small causes, which were half of his own creation. Why was he making any fuss about Mrs. Casaubon? And yet he felt as if something had happened to him with regard to her. There are characters which are continually creating collisions and nodes for themselves in dramas which nobody is prepared to act with them. Their susceptibilities will clash against objects that remain innocently quiet.

CHAPTER 20

A child forsaken, waking suddenly,
Whose gaze afeard on all things round doth rove,
And seeth only that it cannot see
The meeting eyes of love.

Two hours later, Dorothea was seated in an inner room, or boudoir, of a handsome apartment in the Via Sistina.

I am sorry to add that she was sobbing bitterly, with such abandonment to this relief of an oppressed heart as a woman habitually controlled by pride on her own account and thoughtfulness for others will sometimes allow herself when she feels securely alone. And Mr. Casaubon was certain to remain away for some time at the Vatican.

Yet Dorothea had no distinctly shapen grievance that she could state even to herself; and in the midst of her confused thought and passion, the mental act that was struggling forth into clearness was a self-accusing cry that her feeling of desolation was the fault of her own spiritual poverty. She had married the man of her choice, and with the advantage over most girls that she had contemplated her marriage chiefly as the beginning of new duties: from the very first she had thought of Mr. Casaubon as having a mind so much above her own that he must often be claimed by studies which she could not entirely share; moreover, after the brief, narrow experience of her girlhood she was beholding Rome, the city of visible history, where the past of a whole hemisphere seems moving in funeral procession with strange ancestral images and trophies gathered from afar.

But this stupendous fragmentariness heightened the dreamlike strangeness of her bridal life. Dorothea had now been five weeks in Rome, and in the kindly mornings when autumn and winter seemed to go hand in hand like a happy aged couple one of whom would presently survive in chiller loneliness, she had driven about at first with Mr. Casaubon but of late chiefly with Tantripp and their experienced courier. She had been led through the best galleries, had been taken to the chief points of view, had been shown the grandest ruins and the most glorious churches, and she had ended by oftenest choosing to drive out to the Campagna where she could feel alone with the earth and sky, away from the oppressive masquerade of ages, in which her own life too seemed to become a masque with enigmatical costumes.

To those who have looked at Rome with the quickening power of a knowledge which breathes a growing soul into all historic shapes and traces out the suppressed transitions which unite all contrasts, Rome may still be the spiritual centre and interpreter of the world. But let them conceive one more historical contrast: the gigantic broken revelations of that imperial and papal city thrust abruptly on the notions of a girl who had been brought up in English and Swiss Puritanism, fed on meagre Protestant histories and on art chiefly of the hand-screen sort; a girl whose ardent nature turned all her small allowance of knowledge into principles, fusing her actions into their mould, and whose quick emotions gave the most abstract things the quality of a pleasure or a pain; a girl who had lately become a wife and from the enthusiastic acceptance of untried duty found herself plunged in tumultuous preoccupation with her personal lot. The weight of unintelligible Rome might lie easily on bright nymphs to whom it formed a background for the brilliant picnic of Anglo-foreign society, but Dorothea had no such defence against deep impressions. Ruins and basilicas, palaces and colossi, set in the midst of a sordid present, where all that was living and warm-blooded seemed sunk in the deep degeneracy of a superstition divorced from reverence; the dimmer but yet eager titanic life gazing and struggling on walls and ceilings; the long vistas of white forms whose marble eyes seemed to hold the monotonous light of an alien world—all this vast wreck of ambitious ideals, sensuous and spiritual, mixed confusedly with the signs of breathing forgetfulness and degradation, at first jarred her as with an electric shock and then urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas which check the flow of emotion. Forms both pale and glowing took possession of her young sense and fixed themselves in her memory even when she was not thinking of them, preparing strange associations which remained through her after-years. Our moods are apt to bring with them images which succeed each other like the magic-lantern pictures of a doze; and in certain states of dull forlornness Dorothea all her life continued to see the vastness of St. Peter's, the huge bronze canopy, the excited intention in the attitudes and garments of the prophets and evangelists in the mosaics above, and the red drapery which was being hung for Christmas spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina.

Not that this inward amazement of Dorothea's was anything very exceptional: many souls in their young nudity are tumbled out among incongruities and left to "find their feet" among them, while their elders go about their business. Nor can I suppose that when Mrs. Casaubon is discovered in a fit of weeping six weeks after her wedding, the situation will be regarded as tragic. Some discouragement, some faintness of heart at the new real future which replaces the imaginary, is not unusual, and we do not expect people to be deeply moved by what is not unusual. That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind, and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity.

However, Dorothea was crying, and if she had been required to state the cause, she could only have done so in some such general words as I have already used; to have been driven to be more particular would have been like trying to give a

history of the limits and shadows, for that new real future which was replacing the imaginary drew its material from the endless minutiae by which her view of Mr. Casaubon and her wifely relation, now that she was married to him, was gradually changing with the secret motion of a watch-hand from what it had been in her maiden dream. It was too early yet for her fully to recognize or at least admit the change, still more for her to have readjusted that devotedness which was so necessary a part of her mental life that she was almost sure sooner or later to recover it. Permanent rebellion, the disorder of a life without some loving reverent resolve, was not possible to her; but she was now in an interval when the very force of her nature heightened its confusion. In this way the early months of marriage often are times of critical tumult—whether that of a shrimp-pool or of deeper waters—which afterwards subsides into cheerful peace.

But was not Mr. Casaubon just as learned as before? Had his forms of expression changed or his sentiments become less laudable? O waywardness of womanhood! Did his chronology fail him, or his ability to state not only a theory but the names of those who held it, or his provision for giving the heads of any subject on demand? And was not Rome the place in all the world to give free play to such accomplishments? Besides, had not Dorothea's enthusiasm especially dwelt on the prospect of relieving the weight and perhaps the sadness with which great tasks lie on him who has to achieve them? And that such weight pressed on Mr. Casaubon was only plainer than before.

All of these are crushing questions; but whatever else remained the same, the light had changed, and you cannot find the pearly dawn at noonday. The fact is unalterable that a fellow-mortal with whose nature you are acquainted solely through the brief entrances and exits of a few imaginative weeks called courtship may, when seen in the continuity of married companionship, be disclosed as something better or worse than what you have preconceived, but will certainly not appear altogether the same. And it would be astonishing to find how soon the change is felt if we had no kindred changes to compare with it. To share lodgings with a brilliant dinner-companion or to see your favourite politician in the Ministry may bring about changes quite as rapid; in these cases too we begin by knowing little and believing much, and we sometimes end by inverting the quantities.

Still, such comparisons might mislead, for no man was more incapable of flashy make-believe than Mr. Casaubon: he was as genuine a character as any ruminant animal, and he had not actively assisted in creating any illusions about himself. How was it that in the weeks since her marriage Dorothea had not distinctly observed but felt with a stifling depression that the large vistas and wide fresh air which she had dreamed of finding in her husband's mind were replaced by anterooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither? I suppose it was that in courtship everything is regarded as provisional and preliminary, and the smallest sample of virtue or accomplishment is taken to guarantee delightful stores which the broad leisure of marriage will reveal. But the door-sill of marriage once crossed, expectation is concentrated on the present. Having once embarked on your marital voyage, it is impossible not to be aware that you make no way and that the sea is not within sight—that, in fact, you are exploring an enclosed basin.

In their conversation before marriage, Mr. Casaubon had often dwelt on some explanation or questionable detail of which Dorothea did not see the bearing; but such imperfect coherence seemed due to the brokenness of their intercourse, and supported by her faith in their future, she had listened with fervid patience to a recitation of possible arguments to be brought against Mr. Casaubon's entirely new view of the Philistine god Dagon and other fish-deities, thinking that hereafter she should see this subject which touched him so nearly from the same high ground whence doubtless it had become so important to him. Again, the matter-of-course statement and tone of dismissal with which he treated what to her were the most stirring thoughts was easily accounted for as belonging to the sense of haste and preoccupation in which she herself shared during their engagement. But now, since they had been in Rome, with all the depths of her emotion roused to tumultuous activity and with life made a new problem by new elements, she had been becoming more and more aware, with a certain terror, that her mind was continually sliding into inward fits of anger and repulsion or else into forlorn weariness. How far the judicious Hooker or any other hero of erudition would have been the same at Mr. Casaubon's time of life she had no means of knowing, so that he could not have the advantage of comparison; but her husband's way of commenting on the strangely impressive objects around them had begun to affect her with a sort of mental shiver; he had perhaps the best intention of acquitting himself worthily, but only of acquitting himself. What was fresh to her mind was worn out to his; and such capacity of thought and feeling as had ever been stimulated in him by the general life of mankind had long shrunk to a sort of dried preparation, a lifeless embalmment of knowledge.

When he said, "Does this interest you, Dorothea? Shall we stay a little longer? I am ready to stay if you wish it," it seemed to her as if going or staying were alike, dreary. Or, "Should you like to go to the Farnesina, Dorothea? It contains celebrated frescoes designed or painted by Raphael, which most persons think it worth while to visit."

"But do you care about them?" was always Dorothea's question.

"They are, I believe, highly esteemed. Some of them represent the fable of Cupid and Psyche, which is probably the romantic invention of a literary period and cannot, I think, be reckoned as a genuine mythical product. But if you like these wall-paintings we can easily drive thither; and you will then, I think, have seen the chief works of Raphael, any of which it were a pity to omit in a visit to Rome. He is the painter who has been held to combine the most complete grace of form with sublimity of expression. Such at least I have gathered to be the opinion of cognoscenti."

This kind of answer, given in a measured, official tone, as of a clergyman reading according to the rubric, did not help to justify the glories of the Eternal City or to give her the hope that if she knew more about them the world would be joyously illuminated for her. There is hardly any contact more depressing to a young, ardent creature than that of a mind in which years full of knowledge seem to have issued in a blank absence of interest or sympathy.

On other subjects indeed Mr. Casaubon showed a tenacity of occupation and an eagerness which are usually regarded as the effect of enthusiasm, and Dorothea was anxious to follow this spontaneous direction of his thoughts instead of being made to feel that she dragged him away from it. But she was gradually ceasing to expect with her former delightful confidence that she should see any wide opening where she followed him. Poor Mr. Casaubon himself was lost among small closets and winding stairs, and in an agitated dimness about the Cabeiri, or in an exposure of other mythologists' ill-considered parallels, easily lost sight of any purpose which had prompted him to these labours. With his taper stuck before him he forgot the absence of windows, and in bitter manuscript remarks on other men's notions about the solar deities, he

had become indifferent to the sunlight.

These characteristics, fixed and unchangeable as bone in Mr. Casaubon, might have remained longer unfelt by Dorothea if she had been encouraged to pour forth her girlish and womanly feeling—if he would have held her hands between his and listened with the delight of tenderness and understanding to all the little histories which made up her experience, and would have given her the same sort of intimacy in return, so that the past life of each could be included in their mutual knowledge and affection—or if she could have fed her affection with those childlike caresses which are the bent of every sweet woman who has begun by showering kisses on the hard pate of her bald doll, creating a happy soul within that woodenness from the wealth of her own love. That was Dorothea's bent. With all her yearning to know what was afar from her and to be widely benignant, she had ardour enough for what was near to have kissed Mr. Casaubon's coat-sleeve or to have caressed his shoe-latchet if he would have made any other sign of acceptance than pronouncing her, with his unfailing propriety, to be of a most affectionate and truly feminine nature, indicating at the same time by politely reaching a chair for her that he regarded these manifestations as rather crude and startling. Having made his clerical toilette with due care in the morning, he was prepared only for those amenities of life which were suited to the well-adjusted stiff cravat of the period and to a mind weighted with unpublished matter.

And by a sad contradiction Dorothea's ideas and resolves seemed like melting ice floating and lost in the warm flood of which they had been but another form. She was humiliated to find herself a mere victim of feeling, as if she could know nothing except through that medium: all her strength was scattered in fits of agitation, of struggle, of despondency, and then again in visions of more complete renunciation, transforming all hard conditions into duty. Poor Dorothea! She was certainly troublesome—to herself chiefly; but this morning for the first time she had been troublesome to Mr. Casaubon.

She had begun, while they were taking coffee, with a determination to shake off what she inwardly called her selfishness, and turned a face all cheerful attention to her husband when he said, "My dear Dorothea, we must now think of all that is yet left undone as a preliminary to our departure. I would fain have returned home earlier that we might have been at Lowick for the Christmas, but my inquiries here have been protracted beyond their anticipated period. I trust, however, that the time here has not been passed unpleasantly to you. Among the sights of Europe, that of Rome has ever been held one of the most striking and in some respects edifying. I well remember that I considered it an epoch in my life when I visited it for the first time, after the fall of Napoleon, an event which opened the Continent to travellers. Indeed I think it is one among several cities to which an extreme hyperbole has been applied—'See Rome and die'; but in your case I would propose an emendation and say, See Rome as a bride and live thenceforth as a happy wife."

Mr. Casaubon pronounced this little speech with the most conscientious intention, blinking a little and swaying his head up and down, and concluding with a smile. He had not found marriage a rapturous state, but he had no idea of being anything else than an irreproachable husband who would make a charming young woman as happy as she deserved to be.

"I hope you are thoroughly satisfied with our stay—I mean, with the result so far as your studies are concerned," said Dorothea, trying to keep her mind fixed on what most affected her husband.

"Yes," said Mr. Casaubon with that peculiar pitch of voice which makes the word half a negative. "I have been led farther than I had foreseen, and various subjects for annotation have presented themselves which, though I have no direct need of them, I could not pretermit. The task, notwithstanding the assistance of my amanuensis, has been a somewhat laborious one, but your society has happily prevented me from that too continuous prosecution of thought beyond the hours of study which has been the snare of my solitary life."

"I am very glad that my presence has made any difference to you," said Dorothea, who had a vivid memory of evenings in which she had supposed that Mr. Casaubon's mind had gone too deep during the day to be able to get to the surface again. I fear there was a little temper in her reply. "I hope when we get to Lowick I shall be more useful to you and be able to enter a little more into what interests you."

"Doubtless, my dear," said Mr. Casaubon with a slight bow. "The notes I have here made will want sifting, and you can, if you please, extract them under my direction."

"And all your notes," said Dorothea, whose heart had already burned within her on this subject so that now she could not help speaking with her tongue. "All those rows of volumes—will you not now do what you used to speak of? Will you not make up your mind what part of them you will use, and begin to write the book which will make your vast knowledge useful to the world? I will write to your dictation or I will copy and extract what you tell me: I can be of no other use." Dorothea, in a most unaccountable, darkly feminine manner, ended with a slight sob and eyes full of tears.

The excessive feeling manifested would alone have been highly disturbing to Mr. Casaubon, but there were other reasons why Dorothea's words were among the most cutting and irritating to him that she could have been impelled to use. She was as blind to his inward troubles as he to hers: she had not yet learned those hidden conflicts in her husband which claim our pity. She had not yet listened patiently to his heartbeats, but only felt that her own was beating violently. In Mr. Casaubon's ear, Dorothea's voice gave loud, emphatic iteration to those muffled suggestions of consciousness which it was possible to explain as mere fancy, the illusion of exaggerated sensitiveness; always when such suggestions are unmistakably repeated from without they are resisted as cruel and unjust. We are angered even by the full acceptance of our humiliating confessions—how much more by hearing in hard, distinct syllables from the lips of a near observer those confused murmurs which we try to call morbid and strive against as if they were the oncoming of numbness! And this cruel outward accuser was there in the shape of a wife—nay, of a young bride, who, instead of observing his abundant pen-scratches and amplitude of paper with the uncritical awe of an elegant-minded canary-bird, seemed to present herself as a spy watching everything with a malign power of inference. Here, towards this particular point of the compass, Mr. Casaubon had a sensitiveness to match Dorothea's and an equal quickness to imagine more than the fact. He had formerly observed with approbation her capacity for worshipping the right object; he now foresaw with sudden terror that this capacity might be replaced by presumption, this worship by the most exasperating of all criticism—that which sees vaguely a great many fine ends and has not the least notion what it costs to reach them.

For the first time since Dorothea had known him, Mr. Casaubon's face had a quick, angry flush upon it.

"My love," he said with irritation reined in by propriety, "you may rely upon me for knowing the times and the seasons

adapted to the different stages of a work which is not to be measured by the facile conjectures of ignorant onlookers. It had been easy for me to gain a temporary effect by a mirage of baseless opinion, but it is ever the trial of the scrupulous explorer to be saluted with the impatient scorn of chatterers who attempt only the smallest achievements, being indeed equipped for no other. And it were well if all such could be admonished to discriminate judgements of which the true subject matter lies entirely beyond their reach from those of which the elements may be compassed by a narrow and superficial survey."

This speech was delivered with an energy and readiness quite unusual with Mr. Casaubon. It was not indeed entirely an improvisation, but had taken shape in inward colloquy and rushed out like the round grains from a fruit when sudden heat cracks it. Dorothea was not only his wife: she was a personification of that shallow world which surrounds the ill-appreciated or desponding author.

Dorothea was indignant in her turn. Had she not been repressing everything in herself except the desire to enter into some fellowship with her husband's chief interests?

"My judgement *was* a very superficial one—such as I am capable of forming," she answered with a prompt resentment that needed no rehearsal. "You showed me the rows of notebooks—you have often spoken of them—you have often said that they wanted digesting. But I never heard you speak of the writing that is to be published. Those were very simple facts, and my judgement went no farther. I only begged you to let me be of some good to you."

Dorothea rose to leave the table and Mr. Casaubon made no reply, taking up a letter which lay beside him as if to re-peruse it. Both were shocked at their mutual situation—that each should have betrayed anger towards the other. If they had been at home, settled at Lowick in ordinary life among their neighbours, the clash would have been less embarrassing, but on a wedding journey, the express object of which is to isolate two people on the ground that they are all the world to each other, the sense of disagreement is, to say the least, confounding and stultifying. To have changed your longitude extensively and placed yourselves in a moral solitude in order to have small explosions, to find conversation difficult, and to hand a glass of water without looking can hardly be regarded as satisfactory fulfilment even to the toughest minds. To Dorothea's inexperienced sensitiveness, it seemed like a catastrophe, changing all prospects; and to Mr. Casaubon it was a new pain, he never having been on a wedding journey before or found himself in that close union which was more of a subjection than he had been able to imagine, since this charming young bride not only obliged him to much consideration on her behalf (which he had sedulously given), but turned out to be capable of agitating him cruelly just where he most needed soothing. Instead of getting a soft fence against the cold, shadowy, unapplausive audience of his life, had he only given it a more substantial presence?

Neither of them felt it possible to speak again at present. To have reversed a previous arrangement and declined to go out would have been a show of persistent anger which Dorothea's conscience shrank from, seeing that she already began to feel herself guilty. However just her indignation might be, her ideal was not to claim justice, but to give tenderness. So when the carriage came to the door, she drove with Mr. Casaubon to the Vatican, walked with him through the stony avenue of inscriptions, and when she parted with him at the entrance to the library, went on through the museum out of mere listlessness as to what was around her. She had not spirit to turn round and say that she would drive anywhere. It was when Mr. Casaubon was quitting her that Naumann had first seen her, and he had entered the long gallery of sculpture at the same time with her; but here Naumann had to await Ladislaw, with whom he was to settle a bet of champagne about an enigmatical mediaeval-looking figure there. After they had examined the figure and walked on finishing their dispute, they had parted, Ladislaw lingering behind while Naumann had gone into the Hall of Statues, where he again saw Dorothea, and saw her in that brooding abstraction which made her pose remarkable. She did not really see the streak of sunlight on the floor more than she saw the statues; she was inwardly seeing the light of years to come in her own home and over the English fields and elms and hedge-bordered highroads, and feeling that the way in which they might be filled with joyful devotedness was not so clear to her as it had been. But in Dorothea's mind there was a current into which all thought and feeling were apt sooner or later to flow—the reaching forward of the whole consciousness towards the fullest truth, the least partial good. There was clearly something better than anger and despondency.

CHAPTER 21

Hire facounde eke full womanly and plain,
No contrefeted terms had she
To semen wise.

—CHAUCER

It was in that way Dorothea came to be sobbing as soon as she was securely alone. But she was presently roused by a knock at the door, which made her hastily dry her eyes before saying, “Come in.” Tantripp had brought a card and said that there was a gentleman waiting in the lobby. The courier had told him that only Mrs. Casaubon was at home, but he said he was a relation of Mr. Casaubon’s: would she see him?

“Yes,” said Dorothea without pause; “show him into the salon.” Her chief impressions about young Ladislaw were that when she had seen him at Lowick she had been made aware of Mr. Casaubon’s generosity towards him, and also that she had been interested in his own hesitation about his career. She was alive to anything that gave her an opportunity for active sympathy, and at this moment it seemed as if the visit had come to shake her out of her self-absorbed discontent—to remind her of her husband’s goodness, and make her feel that she had now the right to be his helpmate in all kind deeds. She waited a minute or two, but when she passed into the next room there were just signs enough that she had been crying to make her open face look more youthful and appealing than usual. She met Ladislaw with that exquisite smile of goodwill which is unmixed with vanity and held out her hand to him. He was the elder by several years, but at that moment he looked much the younger, for his transparent complexion flushed suddenly and he spoke with a shyness extremely unlike the ready indifference of his manner with his male companion, while Dorothea became all the calmer with a wondering desire to put him at ease.

“I was not aware that you and Mr. Casaubon were in Rome until this morning, when I saw you in the Vatican museum,” he said. “I knew you at once—but—I mean, that I concluded Mr. Casaubon’s address would be found at the Poste Restante, and I was anxious to pay my respects to him and you as early as possible.”

“Pray sit down. He is not here now, but he will be glad to hear of you, I am sure,” said Dorothea, seating herself unthinkingly between the fire and the light of the tall window and pointing to a chair opposite with the quietude of a benignant matron. The signs of girlish sorrow in her face were only the more striking. “Mr. Casaubon is much engaged, but you will leave your address—will you not? And he will write to you.”

“You are very good,” said Ladislaw, beginning to lose his diffidence in the interest with which he was observing the signs of weeping which had altered her face. “My address is on my card. But if you will allow me, I will call again tomorrow at an hour when Mr. Casaubon is likely to be at home.”

“He goes to read in the library of the Vatican every day, and you can hardly see him except by an appointment. Especially now. We are about to leave Rome, and he is very busy. He is usually away almost from breakfast till dinner. But I am sure he will wish you to dine with us.”

Will Ladislaw was struck mute for a few moments. He had never been fond of Mr. Casaubon, and if it had not been for the sense of obligation, would have laughed at him as a bat of erudition. But the idea of this dried-up pedant, this elaborator of small explanations about as important as the surplus stock of false antiquities kept in a vendor’s back chamber, having first got this adorable young creature to marry him and then passing his honeymoon away from her, groping after his mouldy futilities (Will was given to hyperbole)—this sudden picture stirred him with a sort of comic disgust: he was divided between the impulse to laugh aloud and the equally unseasonable impulse to burst into scornful invective. For an instant he felt that the struggle was causing a queer contortion of his mobile features, but with a good effort he resolved it into nothing more offensive than a merry smile.

Dorothea wondered, but the smile was irresistible and shone back from her face too. Will Ladislaw’s smile was delightful unless you were angry with him beforehand: it was a gush of inward light illuminating the transparent skin as well as the eyes, and playing about every curve and line as if some Ariel were touching them with a new charm and banishing forever the traces of moodiness. The reflection of that smile could not but have a little merriment in it too, even under dark eyelashes still moist, as Dorothea said inquiringly, “Something amuses you?”

“Yes,” said Will, quick in finding resources. “I am thinking of the sort of figure I cut the first time I saw you, when you annihilated my poor sketch with your criticism.”

“My criticism?” said Dorothea, wondering still more. “Surely not. I always feel particularly ignorant about painting.”

“I suspected you of knowing so much that you knew how to say just what was most cutting. You said—I daresay you don’t remember it as I do—that the relation of my sketch to nature was quite hidden from you. At least, you implied that.” Will could laugh now as well as smile.

“That was really my ignorance,” said Dorothea, admiring Will’s good humour. “I must have said so only because I never could see any beauty in the pictures which my uncle told me all judges thought very fine. And I have gone about with just the same ignorance in Rome. There are comparatively few paintings that I can really enjoy. At first when I enter a room where the walls are covered with frescoes or with rare pictures, I feel a kind of awe—like a child present at great ceremonies where there are grand robes and processions; I feel myself in the presence of some higher life than my own. But

when I begin to examine the pictures one by one, the life goes out of them or else is something violent and strange to me. It must be my own dulness. I am seeing so much all at once and not understanding half of it. That always makes one feel stupid. It is painful to be told that anything is very fine and not be able to feel that it is fine—something like being blind while people talk of the sky."

"Oh, there is a great deal in the feeling for art which must be acquired," said Will. (It was impossible now to doubt the directness of Dorothea's confession.) "Art is an old language with a great many artificial, affected styles, and sometimes the chief pleasure one gets out of knowing them is the mere sense of knowing. I enjoy the art of all sorts here immensely, but I suppose if I could pick my enjoyment to pieces I should find it made up of many different threads. There is something in daubing a little one's self and having an idea of the process."

"You mean perhaps to be a painter?" said Dorothea with a new direction of interest. "You mean to make painting your profession. Mr. Casaubon will like to hear that you have chosen a profession."

"No, oh no," said Will with some coldness. "I have quite made up my mind against it. It is too one-sided a life. I have been seeing a great deal of the German artists here; I travelled from Frankfort with one of them. Some are fine, even brilliant fellows, but I should not like to get into their way of looking at the world entirely from the studio point of view."

"That I can understand," said Dorothea cordially. "And in Rome it seems as if there were so many things which are more wanted in the world than pictures. But if you have a genius for painting, would it not be right to take that as a guide? Perhaps you might do better things than these—or different, so that there might not be so many pictures almost all alike in the same place."

There was no mistaking this simplicity, and Will was won by it into frankness. "A man must have a very rare genius to make changes of that sort. I am afraid mine would not carry me even to the pitch of doing well what has been done already, at least not so well as to make it worth while. And I should never succeed in anything by dint of drudgery. If things don't come easily to me I never get them."

"I have heard Mr. Casaubon say that he regrets your want of patience," said Dorothea gently. She was rather shocked at this mode of taking all life as a holiday.

"Yes, I know Mr. Casaubon's opinion. He and I differ."

The slight streak of contempt in this hasty reply offended Dorothea. She was all the more susceptible about Mr. Casaubon because of her morning's trouble.

"Certainly you differ," she said rather proudly. "I did not think of comparing you; such power of persevering devoted labour as Mr. Casaubon's is not common."

Will saw that she was offended, but this only gave an additional impulse to the new irritation of his latent dislike towards Mr. Casaubon. It was too intolerable that Dorothea should be worshipping this husband; such weakness in a woman is pleasant to no man but the husband in question. Mortals are easily tempted to pinch the life out of their neighbour's buzzing glory and think that such killing is no murder.

"No, indeed," he answered promptly. "And therefore it is a pity that it should be thrown away, as so much English scholarship is, for want of knowing what is being done by the rest of the world. If Mr. Casaubon read German he would save himself a great deal of trouble."

"I do not understand you," said Dorothea, startled and anxious.

"I merely mean," said Will in an offhand way, "that the Germans have taken the lead in historical inquiries, and they laugh at results which are got by groping about in woods with a pocket-compass while they have made good roads. When I was with Mr. Casaubon I saw that he deafened himself in that direction: it was almost against his will that he read a Latin treatise written by a German. I was very sorry."

Will only thought of giving a good pinch that would annihilate that vaunted laboriousness, and was unable to imagine the mode in which Dorothea would be wounded. Young Mr. Ladislaw was not at all deep himself in German writers, but very little achievement is required in order to pity another man's shortcomings.

Poor Dorothea felt a pang at the thought that the labour of her husband's life might be void, which left her no energy to spare for the question whether this young relative who was so much obliged to him ought not to have repressed his observation. She did not even speak, but sat looking at her hands, absorbed in the piteousness of that thought.

Will, however, having given that annihilating pinch, was rather ashamed, imagining from Dorothea's silence that he had offended her still more and having also a conscience about plucking the tail-feathers from a benefactor.

"I regretted it especially," he resumed, taking the usual course from detraction to insincere eulogy, "because of my gratitude and respect towards my cousin. It would not signify so much in a man whose talents and character were less distinguished."

Dorothea raised her eyes, brighter than usual with excited feeling, and said in her saddest recitative, "How I wish I had learned German when I was at Lausanne! There were plenty of German teachers. But now I can be of no use."

There was a new light, but still a mysterious light, for Will in Dorothea's last words. The question how she had come to accept Mr. Casaubon, which he had dismissed when he first saw her by saying that she must be disagreeable in spite of appearances, was not now to be answered on any such short and easy method. Whatever else she might be, she was not disagreeable. She was not coldly clever and indirectly satirical, but adorably simple and full of feeling. She was an angel beguiled. It would be a unique delight to wait and watch for the melodious fragments in which her heart and soul came forth so directly and ingenuously. The Aeolian harp again came into his mind.

She must have made some original romance for herself in this marriage. And if Mr. Casaubon had been a dragon who had carried her off to his lair with his talons simply and without legal forms, it would have been an unavoidable feat of heroism to release her and fall at her feet. But he was something more unmanageable than a dragon: he was a benefactor with collective society at his back, and he was at that moment entering the room in all the unimpeachable correctness of his demeanour, while Dorothea was looking animated with a newly roused alarm and regret and Will was looking animated with his admiring speculation about her feelings.

Mr. Casaubon felt a surprise which was quite unmixed with pleasure, but he did not swerve from his usual politeness of

greeting when Will rose and explained his presence. Mr. Casaubon was less happy than usual, and this perhaps made him look all the dimmer and more faded; else, the effect might easily have been produced by the contrast of his young cousin's appearance. The first impression on seeing Will was one of sunny brightness, which added to the uncertainty of his changing expression. Surely, his very features changed their form; his jaw looked sometimes large and sometimes small, and the little ripple in his nose was a preparation for metamorphosis. When he turned his head quickly his hair seemed to shake out light, and some persons thought they saw decided genius in this coruscation. Mr. Casaubon, on the contrary, stood rayless.

As Dorothea's eyes were turned anxiously on her husband, she was perhaps not insensible to the contrast, but it was only mingled with other causes in making her more conscious of that new alarm on his behalf which was the first stirring of a pitying tenderness fed by the realities of his lot and not by her own dreams. Yet it was a source of greater freedom to her that Will was there; his young equality was agreeable, and also perhaps his openness to conviction. She felt an immense need of someone to speak to, and she had never before seen anyone who seemed so quick and pliable, so likely to understand everything.

Mr. Casaubon gravely hoped that Will was passing his time profitably as well as pleasantly in Rome—had thought his intention was to remain in South Germany—but begged him to come and dine tomorrow, when he could converse more at large; at present he was somewhat weary. Ladislaw understood, and accepting the invitation, immediately took his leave.

Dorothea's eyes followed her husband anxiously while he sank down wearily at the end of a sofa, and resting his elbow, supported his head and looked on the floor. A little flushed, and with bright eyes, she seated herself beside him, and said, "Forgive me for speaking so hastily to you this morning. I was wrong. I fear I hurt you and made the day more burdensome."

"I am glad that you feel that, my dear," said Mr. Casaubon. He spoke quietly and bowed his head a little, but there was still an uneasy feeling in his eyes as he looked at her.

"But you do forgive me?" said Dorothea with a quick sob. In her need for some manifestation of feeling she was ready to exaggerate her own fault. Would not love see returning penitence afar off and fall on its neck and kiss it?

"My dear Dorothea—'who with repentance is not satisfied, is not of heaven nor earth'—you do not think me worthy to be banished by that severe sentence," said Mr. Casaubon, exerting himself to make a strong statement, and also to smile faintly.

Dorothea was silent, but a tear which had come up with the sob would insist on falling.

"You are excited, my dear. And I also am feeling some unpleasant consequences of too much mental disturbance," said Mr. Casaubon. In fact, he had it in his thought to tell her that she ought not to have received young Ladislaw in his absence, but he abstained, partly from the sense that it would be ungracious to bring a new complaint in the moment of her penitent acknowledgement, partly because he wanted to avoid further agitation of himself by speech, and partly because he was too proud to betray that jealousy of disposition which was not so exhausted on his scholarly compeers that there was none to spare in other directions. There is a sort of jealousy which needs very little fire; it is hardly a passion, but a blight bred in the cloudy, damp despondency of uneasy egoism.

"I think it is time for us to dress," he added, looking at his watch. They both rose, and there was never any further allusion between them to what had passed on this day.

But Dorothea remembered it to the last with the vividness with which we all remember epochs in our experience when some dear expectation dies or some new motive is born. Today she had begun to see that she had been under a wild illusion in expecting a response to her feeling from Mr. Casaubon, and she had felt the waking of a presentiment that there might be a sad consciousness in his life which made as great a need on his side as on her own.

We are all of us born in moral stupidity, taking the world as an udder to feed our supreme selves: Dorothea had early begun to emerge from that stupidity, but yet it had been easier to her to imagine how she would devote herself to Mr. Casaubon and become wise and strong in his strength and wisdom than to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects—that he had an equivalent centre of self whence the lights and shadows must always fall with a certain difference.

CHAPTER 22

Nous causâmes longtemps; elle était simple et bonne.
Ne sachant pas le mal, elle faisait le bien;
Des richesses du coeur elle me fit l'aumône,
Et tout en écoutant comme le coeur se donne,
Sans oser y penser, je lui donnai le mien;
Elle emporta ma vie, et n'en sut jamais rien.

—ALFRED DE MUSSET

Will Ladislaw was delightfully agreeable at dinner the next day and gave no opportunity for Mr. Casaubon to show disapprobation. On the contrary it seemed to Dorothea that Will had a happier way of drawing her husband into conversation and of deferentially listening to him than she had ever observed in anyone before. To be sure, the listeners about Tipton were not highly gifted! Will talked a good deal himself, but what he said was thrown in with such rapidity and with such an unimportant air of saying something by the way that it seemed a gay little chime after the great bell. If Will was not always perfect, this was certainly one of his good days. He described touches of incident among the poor people in Rome only to be seen by one who could move about freely; he found himself in agreement with Mr. Casaubon as to the unsound opinions of Middleton concerning the relations of Judaism and Catholicism; and passed easily to a half-enthusiastic, half-playful picture of the enjoyment he got out of the very miscellaneousness of Rome, which made the mind flexible with constant comparison and saved you from seeing the world's ages as a set of boxlike partitions without vital connexion. Mr. Casaubon's studies, Will observed, had always been of too broad a kind for that, and he had perhaps never felt any such sudden effect, but for himself he confessed that Rome had given him quite a new sense of history as a whole: the fragments stimulated his imagination and made him constructive. Then occasionally, but not too often, he appealed to Dorothea, and discussed what she said as if her sentiment were an item to be considered in the final judgement even of the Madonna di Foligno or the Laocoön. A sense of contributing to form the world's opinion makes conversation particularly cheerful, and Mr. Casaubon too was not without his pride in his young wife, who spoke better than most women, as indeed he had perceived in choosing her.

Since things were going on so pleasantly, Mr. Casaubon's statement that his labours in the library would be suspended for a couple of days and that after a brief renewal he should have no further reason for staying in Rome encouraged Will to urge that Mrs. Casaubon should not go away without seeing a studio or two. Would not Mr. Casaubon take her? That sort of thing ought not to be missed; it was quite special, it was a form of life that grew like a small fresh vegetation with its population of insects on huge fossils. Will would be happy to conduct them—not to anything wearisome, only to a few examples.

Mr. Casaubon, seeing Dorothea look earnestly towards him, could not but ask her if she would be interested in such visits: he was now at her service during the whole day; and it was agreed that Will should come on the morrow and drive with them.

Will could not omit Thorwaldsen, a living celebrity about whom even Mr. Casaubon inquired, but before the day was far advanced he led the way to the studio of his friend Adolf Naumann, whom he mentioned as one of the chief renovators of Christian art, one of those who had not only revived but expanded that grand conception of supreme events as mysteries at which the successive ages were spectators and in relation to which the great souls of all periods became, as it were, contemporaries. Will added that he had made himself Naumann's pupil for the nonce.

"I have been making some oil-sketches under him," said Will. "I hate copying. I must put something of my own in. Naumann has been painting the *Saints Drawing the Car of the Church*, and I have been making a sketch of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine Driving the Conquered Kings in His Chariot*. I am not so ecclesiastical as Naumann and I sometimes twit him with his excess of meaning. But this time I mean to outdo him in breadth of intention. I take Tamburlaine in his chariot for the tremendous course of the world's physical history lashing on the harnessed dynasties. In my opinion, that is a good mythical interpretation." Will here looked at Mr. Casaubon who received this offhand treatment of symbolism very uneasily and bowed with a neutral air.

"The sketch must be very grand if it conveys so much," said Dorothea. "I should need some explanation even of the meaning you give. Do you intend Tamburlaine to represent earthquakes and volcanoes?"

"Oh yes," said Will, laughing, "and migrations of races and clearings of forests—and America and the steam-engine. Everything you can imagine!"

"What a difficult kind of shorthand!" said Dorothea, smiling towards her husband. "It would require all your knowledge to be able to read it."

Mr. Casaubon blinked furtively at Will. He had a suspicion that he was being laughed at. But it was not possible to include Dorothea in the suspicion.

They found Naumann painting industriously, but no model was present; his pictures were advantageously arranged, and his own plain, vivacious person set off by a dove-coloured blouse and a maroon velvet cap so that everything was as fortunate as if he had expected the beautiful young English lady exactly at that time.

The painter in his confident English gave little dissertations on his finished and unfinished subjects, seeming to observe Mr. Casaubon as much as he did Dorothea. Will burst in here and there with ardent words of praise, marking out particular merits in his friend's work; and Dorothea felt that she was getting quite new notions as to the significance of Madonnas seated under inexplicable canopied thrones with the simple country as a background and of saints with architectural models in their hands or knives accidentally wedged in their skulls. Some things which had seemed monstrous to her were gathering intelligibility and even a natural meaning, but all this was apparently a branch of knowledge in which Mr. Casaubon had not interested himself.

"I think I would rather feel that painting is beautiful than have to read it as an enigma, but I should learn to understand these pictures sooner than yours with the very wide meaning," said Dorothea, speaking to Will.

"Don't speak of my painting before Naumann," said Will. "He will tell you it is all *pfuscherei*, which is his most opprobrious word!"

"Is that true?" said Dorothea, turning her sincere eyes on Naumann, who made a slight grimace and said, "Oh, he does not mean it seriously with painting. His walk must be *belles-lettres*. That is wi-ide."

Naumann's pronunciation of the vowel seemed to stretch the word satirically. Will did not half like it, but managed to laugh; and Mr. Casaubon, while he felt some disgust at the artist's German accent, began to entertain a little respect for his judicious severity.

The respect was not diminished when Naumann, after drawing Will aside for a moment and looking, first at a large canvas, then at Mr. Casaubon, came forward again and said, "My friend Ladislaw thinks you will pardon me, sir, if I say that a sketch of your head would be invaluable to me for the St. Thomas Aquinas in my picture there. It is too much to ask, but I so seldom see just what I want—the idealistic in the real."

"You astonish me greatly, sir," said Mr. Casaubon, his looks improved with a glow of delight; "but if my poor physiognomy, which I have been accustomed to regard as of the commonest order, can be of any use to you in furnishing some traits for the angelical doctor, I shall feel honoured. That is to say, if the operation will not be a lengthy one and if Mrs. Casaubon will not object to the delay."

As for Dorothea, nothing could have pleased her more unless it had been a miraculous voice pronouncing Mr. Casaubon the wisest and worthiest among the sons of men. In that case her tottering faith would have become firm again.

Naumann's apparatus was at hand in wonderful completeness, and the sketch went on at once as well as the conversation. Dorothea sat down and subsided into calm silence, feeling happier than she had done for a long while before. Everyone about her seemed good, and she said to herself that Rome, if she had only been less ignorant, would have been full of beauty, its sadness would have been winged with hope. No nature could be less suspicious than hers: when she was a child she believed in the gratitude of wasps and the honourable susceptibility of sparrows and was proportionately indignant when their baseness was made manifest.

The adroit artist was asking Mr. Casaubon questions about English politics, which brought long answers, and Will meanwhile had perched himself on some steps in the background overlooking all.

Presently Naumann said, "Now, if I could lay this by for half an hour and take it up again—come and look, Ladislaw—I think it is perfect so far."

Will vented those adjuring interjections which imply that admiration is too strong for syntax, and Naumann said in a tone of piteous regret, "Ah—now—if I could but have had more—but you have other engagements—I could not ask it—or even to come again tomorrow."

"Oh, let us stay!" said Dorothea. "We have nothing to do today except to go about, have we?" she added, looking entreatingly at Mr. Casaubon. "It would be a pity not to make the head as good as possible."

"I am at your service, sir, in the matter," said Mr. Casaubon with polite condescension. "Having given up the interior of my head to idleness, it is as well that the exterior should work in this way."

"You are unspeakably good—now I am happy!" said Naumann, and then went on in German to Will, pointing here and there to the sketch as if he were considering that. Putting it aside for a moment, he looked round vaguely as if seeking some occupation for his visitors, and afterwards turning to Mr. Casaubon, said, "Perhaps the beautiful bride, the gracious lady, would not be unwilling to let me fill up the time by trying to make a slight sketch of her—not, of course, as you see, for that picture, only as a single study."

Mr. Casaubon, bowing, doubted not that Mrs. Casaubon would oblige him, and Dorothea said at once, "Where shall I put myself?"

Naumann was all apologies in asking her to stand and allow him to adjust her attitude, to which she submitted without any of the affected airs and laughs frequently thought necessary on such occasions, when the painter said, "It is as Santa Clara that I want you to stand—leaning so, with your cheek against your hand—so—looking at that stool, please, so!"

Will was divided between the inclination to fall at the saint's feet and kiss her robe and the temptation to knock Naumann down while he was adjusting her arm. All this was impudence and desecration, and he repented that he had brought her.

The artist was diligent, and Will, recovering himself, moved about and occupied Mr. Casaubon as ingeniously as he could; but he did not in the end prevent the time from seeming long to that gentleman, as was clear from his expressing a fear that Mrs. Casaubon would be tired.

Naumann took the hint and said, "Now, sir, if you can oblige me again, I will release the lady-wife."

So Mr. Casaubon's patience held out further, and when after all it turned out that the head of Saint Thomas Aquinas would be more perfect if another sitting could be had, it was granted for the morrow. On the morrow Santa Clara too was retouched more than once. The result of all was so far from displeasing to Mr. Casaubon that he arranged for the purchase of the picture in which Saint Thomas Aquinas sat among the doctors of the Church in a disputation too abstract to be represented but listened to with more or less attention by an audience above. The Santa Clara, which was spoken of in the second place, Naumann declared himself to be dissatisfied with—he could not, in conscience, engage to make a worthy picture of it; so about the Santa Clara the arrangement was conditional.

I will not dwell on Naumann's jokes at the expense of Mr. Casaubon that evening or on his dithyrambs about Dorothea's charm, in all which Will joined, but with a difference. No sooner did Naumann mention any detail of Dorothea's beauty than Will got exasperated at his presumption: there was grossness in his choice of the most ordinary words, and what business had he to talk of her lips? She was not a woman to be spoken of as other women were. Will could not say just what he thought, but he became irritable. And yet, when after some resistance he had consented to take the Casaubons to his friend's studio, he had been allured by the gratification of his pride in being the person who could grant Naumann such an opportunity of studying her loveliness—or rather her divineness, for the ordinary phrases which might apply to mere bodily prettiness were not applicable to her. (Certainly all Tipton and its neighbourhood, as well as Dorothea herself, would have been surprised at her beauty being made so much of. In that part of the world Miss Brooke had been only a "fine young woman.")

"Oblige me by letting the subject drop, Naumann. Mrs. Casaubon is not to be talked of as if she were a model," said Will. Naumann stared at him.

"*Schön!* I will talk of my Aquinas. The head is not a bad type, after all I dare say the great scholastic himself would have been flattered to have his portrait asked for. Nothing like these starchy doctors for vanity! It was as I thought: he cared much less for her portrait than his own."

"He's a cursed white-blooded pedantic coxcomb," said Will with gnashing impetuosity. His obligations to Mr. Casaubon were not known to his hearer, but Will himself was thinking of them and wishing that he could discharge them all by a cheque.

Naumann gave a shrug and said, "It is good they go away soon, my dear. They are spoiling your fine temper."

All Will's hope and contrivance were now concentrated on seeing Dorothea when she was alone. He only wanted her to take more emphatic notice of him; he only wanted to be something more special in her remembrance than he could yet believe himself likely to be. He was rather impatient under that open, ardent goodwill, which he saw was her usual state of feeling. The remote worship of a woman throned out of their reach plays a great part in men's lives, but in most cases the worshipper longs for some queenly recognition, some approving sign by which his soul's sovereign may cheer him without descending from her high place. That was precisely what Will wanted. But there were plenty of contradictions in his imaginative demands. It was beautiful to see how Dorothea's eyes turned with wifely anxiety and beseeching to Mr. Casaubon. She would have lost some of her halo if she had been without that duteous preoccupation; and yet at the next moment the husband's sandy absorption of such nectar was too intolerable, and Will's longing to say damaging things about him was perhaps not the less tormenting because he felt the strongest reasons for restraining it.

Will had not been invited to dine the next day. Hence he persuaded himself that he was bound to call, and that the only eligible time was the middle of the day, when Mr. Casaubon would not be at home.

Dorothea, who had not been made aware that her former reception of Will had displeased her husband, had no hesitation about seeing him, especially as he might be come to pay a farewell visit. When he entered she was looking at some cameos which she had been buying for Celia. She greeted Will as if his visit were quite a matter of course and said at once, having a cameo bracelet in her hand, "I am so glad you are come. Perhaps you understand all about cameos and can tell me if these are really good. I wished to have you with us in choosing them, but Mr. Casaubon objected, he thought there was not time. He will finish his work tomorrow, and we shall go away in three days. I have been uneasy about these cameos. Pray sit down and look at them."

"I am not particularly knowing, but there can be no great mistake about these little Homeric bits: they are exquisitely neat. And the colour is fine: it will just suit you."

"Oh, they are for my sister, who has quite a different complexion. You saw her with me at Lowick; she is light-haired and very pretty—at least I think so. We were never so long away from each other in our lives before. She is a great pet and never was naughty in her life. I found out before I came away that she wanted me to buy her some cameos, and I should be sorry for them not to be good—after their kind." Dorothea added the last words with a smile.

"You seem not to care about cameos," said Will, seating himself at some distance from her and observing her while she closed the cases.

"No, frankly, I don't think them a great object in life," said Dorothea.

"I fear you are a heretic about art generally. How is that? I should have expected you to be very sensitive to the beautiful everywhere."

"I suppose I am dull about many things," said Dorothea simply. "I should like to make life beautiful—I mean everybody's life. And then, all this immense expense of art, that seems somehow to lie outside life and make it no better for the world, pains one. It spoils my enjoyment of anything when I am made to think that most people are shut out from it."

"I call that the fanaticism of sympathy," said Will impetuously. "You might say the same of landscape, of poetry, of all refinement. If you carried it out you ought to be miserable in your own goodness, and turn evil that you might have no advantage over others. The best piety is to enjoy—when you can. You are doing the most then to save the earth's character as an agreeable planet. And enjoyment radiates. It is of no use to try and take care of all the world; that is being taken care of when you feel delight—in art or in anything else. Would you turn all the youth of the world into a tragic chorus, wailing and moralizing over misery? I suspect that you have some false belief in the virtues of misery and want to make your life a martyrdom." Will had gone further than he intended, and checked himself.

But Dorothea's thought was not taking just the same direction as his own, and she answered without any special emotion, "Indeed you mistake me. I am not a sad, melancholy creature. I am never unhappy long together. I am angry and naughty, not like Celia; I have a great outburst and then all seems glorious again. I cannot help believing in glorious things in a blind sort of way. I should be quite willing to enjoy the art here, but there is so much that I don't know the reason of, so much that seems to me a consecration of ugliness rather than beauty. The painting and sculpture may be wonderful, but the feeling is often low and brutal and sometimes even ridiculous. Here and there I see what takes me at once as noble, something that I might compare with the Alban Mountains or the sunset from the Pincian Hill; but that makes it the greater pity that there is so little of the best kind among all that mass of things over which men have toiled so."

“Of course there is always a great deal of poor work: the rarer things want that soil to grow in.”

“Oh dear,” said Dorothea, taking up that thought into the chief current of her anxiety, “I see it must be very difficult to do anything good. I have often felt since I have been in Rome that most of our lives would look much uglier and more bungling than the pictures if they could be put on the wall.”

Dorothea parted her lips again as if she were going to say more, but changed her mind and paused.

“You are too young—it is an anachronism for you to have such thoughts,” said Will energetically, with a quick shake of the head habitual to him. “You talk as if you had never known any youth. It is monstrous—as if you had had a vision of Hades in your childhood, like the boy in the legend. You have been brought up in some of those horrible notions that choose the sweetest women to devour—like Minotaurs. And now you will go and be shut up in that stone prison at Lowick: you will be buried alive. It makes me savage to think of it! I would rather never have seen you than think of you with such a prospect.”

Will again feared that he had gone too far, but the meaning we attach to words depends on our feeling, and his tone of angry regret had so much kindness in it for Dorothea’s heart, which had always been giving out ardour and had never been fed with much from the living beings around her, that she felt a new sense of gratitude and answered with a gentle smile.

“It is very good of you to be anxious about me. It is because you did not like Lowick yourself: you had set your heart on another kind of life. But Lowick is my chosen home.”

The last sentence was spoken with an almost solemn cadence, and Will did not know what to say, since it would not be useful for him to embrace her slippers and tell her that he would die for her; it was clear that she required nothing of the sort, and they were both silent for a moment or two, when Dorothea began again with an air of saying at last what had been in her mind beforehand.

“I wanted to ask you again about something you said the other day. Perhaps it was half of it your lively way of speaking: I notice that you like to put things strongly; I myself often exaggerate when I speak hastily.”

“What was it?” said Will, observing that she spoke with a timidity quite new in her. “I have a hyperbolical tongue: it catches fire as it goes. I dare say I shall have to retract.”

“I mean what you said about the necessity of knowing German—I mean, for the subjects that Mr. Casaubon is engaged in. I have been thinking about it, and it seems to me that with Mr. Casaubon’s learning he must have before him the same materials as German scholars—has he not?” Dorothea’s timidity was due to an indistinct consciousness that she was in the strange situation of consulting a third person about the adequacy of Mr. Casaubon’s learning.

“Not exactly the same materials,” said Will, thinking that he would be duly reserved. “He is not an Orientalist, you know. He does not profess to have more than second-hand knowledge there.”

“But there are very valuable books about antiquities which were written a long while ago by scholars who knew nothing about these modern things, and they are still used. Why should Mr. Casaubon’s not be valuable, like theirs?” said Dorothea with more remonstrant energy. She was impelled to have the argument aloud which she had been having in her own mind.

“That depends on the line of study taken,” said Will, also getting a tone of rejoinder. “The subject Mr. Casaubon has chosen is as changing as chemistry: new discoveries are constantly making new points of view. Who wants a system on the basis of the four elements or a book to refute Paracelsus? Do you not see that it is no use now to be crawling a little way after men of the last century—men like Bryant—and correcting their mistakes, living in a lumber-room and furbishing up broken-legged theories about Chus and Mizraim?”

“How can you bear to speak so lightly?” said Dorothea with a look between sorrow and anger. “If it were as you say, what could be sadder than so much ardent labour all in vain? I wonder it does not affect you more painfully if you really think that a man like Mr. Casaubon, of so much goodness, power, and learning, should in any way fail in what has been the labour of his best years.” She was beginning to be shocked that she had got to such a point of supposition, and indignant with Will for having led her to it.

“You questioned me about the matter of fact, not of feeling,” said Will. “But if you wish to punish me for the fact, I submit I am not in a position to express my feeling towards Mr. Casaubon; it would be at best a pensioner’s eulogy.”

“Pray excuse me,” said Dorothea, colouring deeply. “I am aware, as you say, that I am in fault in having introduced the subject. Indeed, I am wrong altogether. Failure after long perseverance is much grander than never to have a striving good enough to be called a failure.”

“I quite agree with you,” said Will, determined to change the situation, “so much so that I have made up my mind not to run that risk of never attaining a failure. Mr. Casaubon’s generosity has perhaps been dangerous to me, and I mean to renounce the liberty it has given me. I mean to go back to England shortly and work my own way, depend on nobody else than myself.”

“That is fine; I respect that feeling,” said Dorothea with returning kindness. “But Mr. Casaubon, I am sure, has never thought of anything in the matter except what was most for your welfare.”

“She has obstinacy and pride enough to serve instead of love, now she has married him,” said Will to himself. Aloud he said, rising, “I shall not see you again.”

“Oh, stay till Mr. Casaubon comes,” said Dorothea earnestly. “I am so glad we met in Rome. I wanted to know you.”

“And I have made you angry,” said Will. “I have made you think ill of me.”

“Oh no! My sister tells me I am always angry with people who do not say just what I like. But I hope I am not given to think ill of them. In the end I am usually obliged to think ill of myself for being so impatient.”

“Still, you don’t like me; I have made myself an unpleasant thought to you.”

“Not at all,” said Dorothea with the most open kindness. “I like you very much.”

Will was not quite contented, thinking that he would apparently have been of more importance if he had been disliked. He said nothing, but looked dull, not to say sulky.

“And I am quite interested to see what you will do,” Dorothea went on cheerfully. “I believe devoutly in a natural difference of vocation. If it were not for that belief, I suppose I should be very narrow—there are so many things, besides painting, that I am quite ignorant of. You would hardly believe how little I have taken in of music and literature, which

you know so much of. I wonder what your vocation will turn out to be: perhaps you will be a poet?"

"That depends. To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel that discernment is but a hand playing with finely ordered variety on the chords of emotion—a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge. One may have that condition by fits only."

"But you leave out the poems," said Dorothea. "I think they are wanted to complete the poet. I understand what you mean about knowledge passing into feeling, for that seems to be just what I experience. But I am sure I could never produce a poem."

"You *are* a poem, and that is to be the best part of a poet—what makes up the poet's consciousness in his best moods," said Will, showing such originality as we all share with the morning and the springtime and other endless renewals.

"I am very glad to hear it," said Dorothea, laughing out her words in a birdlike modulation and looking at Will with playful gratitude in her eyes. "What very kind things you say to me!"

"I wish I could ever do anything that would be what you call kind—that I could ever be of the slightest service to you. I fear I shall never have the opportunity." Will spoke with fervour.

"Oh yes!" said Dorothea cordially. "It will come, and I shall remember how well you wish me. I quite hoped that we should be friends when I first saw you—because of your relationship to Mr. Casaubon." There was a certain liquid brightness in her eyes, and Will was conscious that his own were obeying a law of nature and filling too. The allusion to Mr. Casaubon would have spoiled all if anything at that moment could have spoiled the subduing power, the sweet dignity, of her noble unsuspicious inexperience.

"And there is one thing even now that you can do," said Dorothea, rising and walking a little way under the strength of a recurring impulse. "Promise me that you will not again, to anyone, speak of that subject—I mean, about Mr. Casaubon's writings—I mean in that kind of way. It was I who led to it. It was my fault. But promise me."

She had returned from her brief pacing and stood opposite Will, looking gravely at him.

"Certainly, I will promise you," said Will, reddening however. If he never said a cutting word about Mr. Casaubon again and left off receiving favours from him, it would clearly be permissible to hate him the more. The poet must know how to hate, says Goethe; and Will was at least ready with that accomplishment. He said that he must go now without waiting for Mr. Casaubon, whom he would come to take leave of at the last moment. Dorothea gave him her hand, and they exchanged a simple "Good-bye."

But going out of the *porte cochère* he met Mr. Casaubon, and that gentleman, expressing the best wishes for his cousin, politely waived the pleasure of any further leave-taking on the morrow, which would be sufficiently crowded with the preparations for departure.

"I have something to tell you about our cousin Mr. Ladislaw, which I think will heighten your opinion of him," said Dorothea to her husband in the course of the evening. She had mentioned immediately on his entering that Will had just gone away and would come again, but Mr. Casaubon had said, "I met him outside, and we made our final adieux, I believe," saying this with the air and tone by which we imply that any subject, whether private or public, does not interest us enough to wish for a further remark upon it. So Dorothea had waited.

"What is that, my love?" said Mr. Casaubon (he always said "my love" when his manner was the coldest).

"He has made up his mind to leave off wandering at once and to give up his dependence on your generosity. He means soon to go back to England and work his own way. I thought you would consider that a good sign," said Dorothea with an appealing look into her husband's neutral face.

"Did he mention the precise order of occupation to which he would addict himself?"

"No. But he said that he felt the danger which lay for him in your generosity. Of course he will write to you about it. Do you not think better of him for his resolve?"

"I shall await his communication on the subject," said Mr. Casaubon.

"I told him I was sure that the thing you considered in all you did for him was his own welfare. I remembered your goodness in what you said about him when I first saw him at Lowick," said Dorothea, putting her hand on her husband's.

"I had a duty towards him," said Mr. Casaubon, laying his other hand on Dorothea's in conscientious acceptance of her caress, but with a glance which he could not hinder from being uneasy. "The young man, I confess, is not otherwise an object of interest to me, nor need we, I think, discuss his future course, which it is not ours to determine beyond the limits which I have sufficiently indicated."

Dorothea did not mention Will again.

BOOK III

WAITING FOR DEATH

CHAPTER 23

"Your horses of the Sun," he said,
"And first-rate whip Apollo!
Whate'er they be, I'll eat my head,
But I will beat them hollow."

Fred Vincy, we have seen, had a debt on his mind, and though no such immaterial burden could depress that buoyant-hearted young gentleman for many hours together, there were circumstances connected with this debt which made the thought of it unusually importunate. The creditor was Mr. Bambridge, a horse-dealer of the neighbourhood, whose company was much sought in Middlemarch by young men understood to be "addicted to pleasure." During the vacations Fred had naturally required more amusements than he had ready money for, and Mr. Bambridge had been accommodating enough not only to trust him for the hire of horses and the accidental expense of ruining a fine hunter but also to make a small advance by which he might be able to meet some losses at billiards. The total debt was a hundred and sixty pounds. Bambridge was in no alarm about his money, being sure that young Vincy had backers, but he had required something to show for it, and Fred had at first given a bill with his own signature. Three months later he had renewed this bill with the signature of Caleb Garth. On both occasions Fred had felt confident that he should meet the bill himself, having ample funds at disposal in his own hopefulness. You will hardly demand that his confidence should have a basis in external facts; such confidence, we know, is something less coarse and materialistic: it is a comfortable disposition leading us to expect that the wisdom of providence or the folly of our friends, the mysteries of luck or the still greater mystery of our high individual value in the universe, will bring about agreeable issues such as are consistent with our good taste in costume and our general preference for the best style of thing. Fred felt sure that he should have a present from his uncle, that he should have a run of luck, that by dint of "swapping" he should gradually metamorphose a horse worth forty pounds into a horse that would fetch a hundred at any moment—"judgement" being always equivalent to an unspecified sum in hard cash. And in any case, even supposing negations which only a morbid distrust could imagine, Fred had always (at that time) his father's pocket as a last resource so that his assets of hopefulness had a sort of gorgeous superfluity about them. Of what might be the capacity of his father's pocket, Fred had only a vague notion: was not trade elastic? And would not the deficiencies of one year be made up for by the surplus of another? The Vincys lived in an easy, profuse way, not with any new ostentation, but according to the family habits and traditions, so that the children had no standard of economy, and the elder ones retained some of their infantine notion that their father might pay for anything if he would. Mr. Vincy himself had expensive Middlemarch habits—spent money on coursing, on his cellar, and on dinner giving, while Mamma had those running accounts with tradespeople which give a cheerful sense of getting everything one wants without any question of payment. But it was in the nature of fathers, Fred knew, to bully one about expenses; there was always a little storm over his extravagance if he had to disclose a debt, and Fred disliked bad weather within doors. He was too filial to be disrespectful to his father, and he bore the thunder with the certainty that it was transient, but in the meantime it was disagreeable to see his mother cry and also to be obliged to look sulky instead of having fun; for Fred was so good-tempered that if he looked glum under scolding, it was chiefly for propriety's sake. The easier course, plainly, was to renew the bill with a friend's signature. Why not? With the superfluous securities of hope at his command, there was no reason why he should not have increased other people's liabilities to any extent but for the fact that men whose names were good for anything were usually pessimists, indisposed to believe that the universal order of things would necessarily be agreeable to an agreeable young gentleman.

With a favour to ask we review our list of friends, do justice to their more amiable qualities, forgive their little offences, and concerning each in turn try to arrive at the conclusion that he will be eager to oblige us, our own eagerness to be obliged being as communicable as other warmth. Still there is always a certain number who are dismissed as but moderately eager until the others have refused; and it happened that Fred checked off all his friends but one, on the ground that applying to them would be disagreeable, being implicitly convinced that he at least (whatever might be maintained about mankind generally) had a right to be free from anything disagreeable. That he should ever fall into a thoroughly unpleasant position—wear trousers shrunk with washing, eat cold mutton, have to walk for want of a horse, or to "duck under" in any sort of way—was an absurdity irreconcilable with those cheerful intuitions implanted in him by nature. And Fred winced under the idea of being looked down upon as wanting funds for small debts. Thus it came to pass that the friend whom he chose to apply to was at once the poorest and the kindest, namely, Caleb Garth.

The Garths were very fond of Fred, as he was of them; for when he and Rosamond were little ones and the Garths were better off, the slight connexion between the two families through Mr. Featherstone's double marriage (the first to Mr. Garth's sister, and the second to Mrs. Vincy's) had led to an acquaintance which was carried on between the children rather than the parents: the children drank tea together out of their toy tea-cups and spent whole days together in play. Mary was a little hoyden, and Fred at six years old thought her the nicest girl in the world, making her his wife with a brass ring which he had cut from an umbrella. Through all the stages of his education he had kept his affection for the Garths and his habit of going to their house as a second home, though any intercourse between them and the elders of his family had long

ceased. Even when Caleb Garth was prosperous, the Vincys were on condescending terms with him and his wife, for there were nice distinctions of rank in Middlemarch; and though old manufacturers could not any more than dukes be connected with none but equals, they were conscious of an inherent social superiority which was defined with great nicety in practice, though hardly expressible theoretically. Since then Mr. Garth had failed in the building business, which he had unfortunately added to his other avocations of surveyor, valuer, and agent, and conducted that business for a time entirely for the benefit of his assignees, and had been living narrowly, exerting himself to the utmost that he might after all pay twenty shillings in the pound. He had now achieved this, and from all who did not think it a bad precedent, his honourable exertions had won him due esteem; but in no part of the world is genteel visiting founded on esteem, in the absence of suitable furniture and complete dinner-service. Mrs. Vincy had never been at her ease with Mrs. Garth and frequently spoke of her as a woman who had had to work for her bread—meaning that Mrs. Garth had been a teacher before her marriage, in which case an intimacy with Lindley Murray and Mangnall's Questions was something like a draper's discrimination of calico trademarks or a courier's acquaintance with foreign countries: no woman who was better off needed that sort of thing. And since Mary had been keeping Mr. Featherstone's house, Mrs. Vincy's want of liking for the Garths had been converted into something more positive by alarm lest Fred should engage himself to this plain girl whose parents "lived in such a small way." Fred, being aware of this, never spoke at home of his visits to Mrs. Garth, which had of late become more frequent, the increasing ardour of his affection for Mary inclining him the more towards those who belonged to her.

Mr. Garth had a small office in the town, and to this Fred went with his request. He obtained it without much difficulty, for a large amount of painful experience had not sufficed to make Caleb Garth cautious about his own affairs or distrustful of his fellow-men when they had not proved themselves untrustworthy; and he had the highest opinion of Fred, was "sure the lad would turn out well—an open, affectionate fellow with a good bottom to his character—you might trust him for anything." Such was Caleb's psychological argument. He was one of those rare men who are rigid to themselves and indulgent to others. He had a certain shame about his neighbours' errors and never spoke of them willingly; hence he was not likely to divert his mind from the best mode of hardening timber and other ingenious devices in order to preconceive those errors. If he had to blame anyone, it was necessary for him to move all the papers within his reach, or describe various diagrams with his stick, or make calculations with the odd money in his pocket before he could begin; and he would rather do other men's work than find fault with their doing. I fear he was a bad disciplinarian.

When Fred stated the circumstances of his debt, his wish to meet it without troubling his father, and the certainty that the money would be forthcoming so as to cause no one any inconvenience, Caleb pushed his spectacles upward, listened, looked into his favourite's clear young eyes, and believed him, not distinguishing confidence about the future from veracity about the past; but he felt that it was an occasion for a friendly hint as to conduct and that before giving his signature he must give a rather strong admonition. Accordingly, he took the paper and lowered his spectacles, measured the space at his command, reached his pen and examined it, dipped it in the ink and examined it again, then pushed the paper a little way from him, lifted up his spectacles again, showed a deepened depression in the outer angle of his bushy eyebrows, which gave his face a peculiar mildness (pardon these details for once—you would have learned to love them if you had known Caleb Garth), and said in a comfortable tone, "It was a misfortune, eh, that breaking the horse's knees? And then, these exchanges, they don't answer when you have 'cute jockies to deal with. You'll be wiser another time, my boy."

Whereupon Caleb drew down his spectacles and proceeded to write his signature with the care which he always gave to that performance, for whatever he did in the way of business he did well. He contemplated the large, well-proportioned letters and final flourish, with his head a trifle on one side for an instant, then handed it to Fred, said "Good-bye," and returned forthwith to his absorption in a plan for Sir James Chettam's new farm-buildings.

Either because his interest in this work thrust the incident of the signature from his memory, or for some reason of which Caleb was more conscious, Mrs. Garth remained ignorant of the affair.

Since it occurred, a change had come over Fred's sky which altered his view of the distance and was the reason why his uncle Featherstone's present of money was of importance enough to make his colour come and go, first with a too definite expectation and afterwards with a proportionate disappointment. His failure in passing his examination had made his accumulation of college debts the more unpardonable by his father, and there had been an unprecedented storm at home. Mr. Vincy had sworn that if he had anything more of that sort to put up with, Fred should turn out and get his living how he could; and he had never yet quite recovered his good-humoured tone to his son, who had especially enraged him by saying at this stage of things that he did not want to be a clergyman and would rather not "go on with that." Fred was conscious that he would have been yet more severely dealt with if his family as well as himself had not secretly regarded him as Mr. Featherstone's heir, that old gentleman's pride in him and apparent fondness for him serving in the stead of more exemplary conduct—just as when a youthful nobleman steals jewellery we call the act kleptomania, speak of it with a philosophical smile, and never think of his being sent to the house of correction as if he were a ragged boy who had stolen turnips. In fact, tacit expectations of what would be done for him by Uncle Featherstone determined the angle at which most people viewed Fred Vincy in Middlemarch; and in his own consciousness, what Uncle Featherstone would do for him in an emergency or what he would do simply as an incorporated luck formed always an immeasurable depth of aerial perspective. But that present of bank-notes, once made, was measurable, and being applied to the amount of the debt, showed a deficit which had still to be filled up either by Fred's "judgement" or by luck in some other shape. For that little episode of the alleged borrowing, in which he had made his father the agent in getting the Bulstrode certificate, was a new reason against going to his father for money towards meeting his actual debt. Fred was keen enough to foresee that anger would confuse distinctions and that his denial of having borrowed expressly on the strength of his uncle's will would be taken as a falsehood. He had gone to his father and told him one vexatious affair, and he had left another untold: in such cases the complete revelation always produces the impression of a previous duplicity. Now, Fred piqued himself on keeping clear of lies, and even fibs; he often shrugged his shoulders and made a significant grimace at what he called Rosamond's fibs (it is only brothers who can associate such ideas with a lovely girl); and rather than incur the accusation of falsehood, he would even incur some trouble and self-restraint. It was under strong inward pressure of this kind that Fred had taken the wise step of depositing the eighty pounds with his mother. It was a pity that he had not at once given them to Mr.

Garth, but he meant to make the sum complete with another sixty, and with a view to this, he had kept twenty pounds in his own pocket as a sort of seed-corn, which, planted by judgement and watered by luck, might yield more than threefold —a very poor rate of multiplication when the field is a young gentleman's infinite soul, with all the numerals at command.

Fred was not a gambler: he had not that specific disease in which the suspension of the whole nervous energy on a chance or risk becomes as necessary as the dram to the drunkard; he had only the tendency to that diffusive form of gambling which has no alcoholic intensity, but is carried on with the healthiest chyle-fed blood, keeping up a joyous, imaginative activity which fashions events according to desire, and having no fears about its own weather, only sees the advantage there must be to others in going aboard with it. Hopefulness has a pleasure in making a throw of any kind because the prospect of success is certain, and only a more generous pleasure in offering as many as possible a share in the stake. Fred liked play, especially billiards, as he liked hunting or riding a steeplechase; and he only liked it the better because he wanted money and hoped to win. But the twenty pounds' worth of seed-corn had been planted in vain in the seductive green plot—all of it at least which had not been dispersed by the roadside—and Fred found himself close upon the term of payment with no money at command beyond the eighty pounds which he had deposited with his mother. The broken-winded horse which he rode represented a present which had been made to him a long while ago by his uncle Featherstone; his father always allowed him to keep a horse, Mr. Vincy's own habits making him regard this as a reasonable demand even for a son who was rather exasperating. This horse, then, was Fred's property, and in his anxiety to meet the imminent bill he determined to sacrifice a possession without which life would certainly be worth little. He made the resolution with a sense of heroism—heroism forced on him by the dread of breaking his word to Mr. Garth, by his love for Mary and awe of her opinion. He would start for Houndsley horse-fair, which was to be held the next morning, and—simply sell his horse, bringing back the money by coach? Well, the horse would hardly fetch more than thirty pounds, and there was no knowing what might happen; it would be folly to balk himself of luck beforehand. It was a hundred to one that some good chance would fall in his way; the longer he thought of it, the less possible it seemed that he should not have a good chance, and the less reasonable that he should not equip himself with the powder and shot for bringing it down. He would ride to Houndsley with Bambridge and with Horrock "the vet," and without asking them anything expressly, he should virtually get the benefit of their opinion. Before he set out, Fred got the eighty pounds from his mother.

Most of those who saw Fred riding out of Middlemarch in company with Bambridge and Horrock, on his way of course to Houndsley horse-fair, thought that young Vincy was pleasure-seeking as usual; and but for an unwonted consciousness of grave matters on hand, he himself would have had a sense of dissipation and of doing what might be expected of a gay young fellow. Considering that Fred was not at all coarse, that he rather looked down on the manners and speech of young men who had not been to the university, and that he had written stanzas as pastoral and unvoluptuous as his flute-playing, his attraction towards Bambridge and Horrock was an interesting fact which even the love of horse-flesh would not wholly account for without that mysterious influence of "naming," which determinates so much of mortal choice. Under any other name than "pleasure" the society of Messieurs Bambridge and Horrock must certainly have been regarded as monotonous; and to arrive with them at Houndsley on a drizzling afternoon, to get down at the Red Lion in a street shaded with coal-dust and dine in a room furnished with a dirt-enamelled map of the county, a bad portrait of an anonymous horse in a stable, His Majesty George the Fourth with legs and cravat, and various leaden spittoons might have seemed a hard business but for the sustaining power of nomenclature which determined that the pursuit of these things was "gay."

In Mr. Horrock there was certainly an apparent unfathomableness which offered play to the imagination. Costume, at a glance, gave him a thrilling association with horses (enough to specify the hat-brim, which took the slightest upward angle just to escape the suspicion of bending downwards), and nature had given him a face which by dint of Mongolian eyes and a nose, mouth, and chin seeming to follow his hat-brim in a moderate inclination upwards gave the effect of a subdued, unchangeable, sceptical smile, of all expressions the most tyrannous over a susceptible mind, and when accompanied by adequate silence, likely to create the reputation of an invincible understanding, an infinite fund of humour—too dry to flow and probably in a state of immovable crust—and a critical judgement which, if you could ever be fortunate enough to know it, would be *the* thing and no other. It is a physiognomy seen in all vocations, but perhaps it has never been more powerful over the youth of England than in a judge of horses.

Mr. Horrock, at a question from Fred about his horse's fetlock, turned sideways in his saddle and watched the horse's action for the space of three minutes, then turned forward, twitched his own bridle, and remained silent with a profile neither more nor less sceptical than it had been.

The part thus played in dialogue by Mr. Horrock was terribly effective. A mixture of passions was excited in Fred—a mad desire to thrash Horrock's opinion into utterance, restrained by anxiety to retain the advantage of his friendship. There was always the chance that Horrock might say something quite invaluable at the right moment.

Mr. Bambridge had more open manners and appeared to give forth his ideas without economy. He was loud, robust, and was sometimes spoken of as being "given to indulgence"—chiefly in swearing, drinking, and beating his wife. Some people who had lost by him called him a vicious man, but he regarded horse-dealing as the finest of the arts and might have argued plausibly that it had nothing to do with morality. He was undeniably a prosperous man, bore his drinking better than others bore their moderation, and on the whole flourished like the green bay-tree. But his range of conversation was limited, and like the fine old tune "Drops of Brandy," gave you after a while a sense of returning upon itself in a way that might make weak heads dizzy. But a slight infusion of Mr. Bambridge was felt to give tone and character to several circles in Middlemarch, and he was a distinguished figure in the bar and billiard-room at the Green Dragon. He knew some anecdotes about the heroes of the turf and various clever tricks of marquesses and viscounts which seemed to prove that blood asserted its preeminence even among blacklegs; but the minute retentiveness of his memory was chiefly shown about the horses he had himself bought and sold, the number of miles they would trot you in no time without turning a hair being, after the lapse of years, still a subject of passionate asseveration in which he would assist the imagination of his hearers by solemnly swearing that they never saw anything like it. In short, Mr. Bambridge was a man of pleasure and a gay companion.

Fred was subtle and did not tell his friends that he was going to Houndsley bent on selling his horse; he wished to get indirectly at their genuine opinion of its value, not being aware that a genuine opinion was the last thing likely to be extracted from such eminent critics. It was not Mr. Bambridge's weakness to be a gratuitous flatterer. He had never before been so much struck with the fact that this unfortunate bay was a roarer to a degree which required the roundest word for perdition to give you any idea of it.

"You made a bad hand at swapping when you went to anybody but me, Vincy! Why, you never threw your leg across a finer horse than that chestnut, and you gave him for this brute. If you set him cantering, he goes on like twenty sawyers. I never heard but one worse roarer in my life, and that was a roan; it belonged to Pegwell, the corn-factor; he used to drive him in his gig seven years ago, and he wanted me to take him, but I said, 'Thank you, Peg, I don't deal in wind-instruments.' That was what I said. It went the round of the country, that joke did. But, what the hell! The horse was a penny trumpet to that roarer of yours."

"Why, you said just now his was worse than mine," said Fred, more irritable than usual.

"I said a lie, then," said Mr. Bambridge emphatically. "There wasn't a penny to choose between 'em."

Fred spurred his horse, and they trotted on a little way. When they slackened again, Mr. Bambridge said, "Not but what the roan was a better trotter than yours."

"I'm quite satisfied with his paces, I know," said Fred, who required all the consciousness of being in gay company to support him; "I say, his trot is an uncommonly clean one, eh, Horrock?"

Mr. Horrock looked before him with as complete a neutrality as if he had been a portrait by a great master.

Fred gave up the fallacious hope of getting a genuine opinion, but on reflection he saw that Bambridge's depreciation and Horrock's silence were both virtually encouraging and indicated that they thought better of the horse than they chose to say.

That very evening, indeed, before the fair had set in, Fred thought he saw a favourable opening for disposing advantageously of his horse, but an opening which made him congratulate himself on his foresight in bringing with him his eighty pounds. A young farmer acquainted with Mr. Bambridge came into the Red Lion and entered into conversation about parting with a hunter, which he introduced at once as Diamond, implying that it was a public character. For himself he only wanted a useful hack which would draw upon occasion, being about to marry and to give up hunting. The hunter was in a friend's stable at some little distance; there was still time for gentlemen to see it before dark. The friend's stable had to be reached through a back street where you might as easily have been poisoned without expense of drugs as in any grim street of that unsanitary period. Fred was not fortified against disgust by brandy, as his companions were, but the hope of having at last seen the horse that would enable him to make money was exhilarating enough to lead him over the same ground again the first thing in the morning. He felt sure that if he did not come to a bargain with the farmer, Bambridge would; for the stress of circumstances, Fred felt, was sharpening his acuteness and endowing him with all the constructive power of suspicion. Bambridge had run down Diamond in a way that he never would have done (the horse being a friend's) if he had not thought of buying it; everyone who looked at the animal—even Horrock—was evidently impressed with its merit. To get all the advantage of being with men of this sort, you must know how to draw your inferences, and not be a spoon who takes things literally. The colour of the horse was a dappled grey, and Fred happened to know that Lord Medlicote's man was on the look-out for just such a horse. After all his running down, Bambridge let it out in the course of the evening, when the farmer was absent, that he had seen worse horses go for eighty pounds. Of course he contradicted himself twenty times over, but when you know what is likely to be true you can test a man's admissions. And Fred could not but reckon his own judgement of a horse as worth something. The farmer had paused over Fred's respectable though broken-winded steed long enough to show that he thought it worth consideration, and it seemed probable that he would take it, with five-and-twenty pounds in addition, as the equivalent of Diamond. In that case Fred, when he had parted with his new horse for at least eighty pounds, would be fifty-five pounds in pocket by the transaction and would have a hundred and thirty-five pounds towards meeting the bill, so that the deficit temporarily thrown on Mr. Garth would at the utmost be twenty-five pounds. By the time he was hurrying on his clothes in the morning, he saw so clearly the importance of not losing this rare chance that if Bambridge and Horrock had both dissuaded him, he would not have been deluded into a direct interpretation of their purpose: he would have been aware that those deep hands held something else than a young fellow's interest. With regard to horses, distrust was your only clue. But scepticism, as we know, can never be thoroughly applied, else life would come to a standstill; something we must believe in and do, and whatever that something may be called, it is virtually our own judgement even when it seems like the most slavish reliance on another. Fred believed in the excellence of his bargain, and even before the fair had well set in, had got possession of the dappled grey, at the price of his old horse and thirty pounds in addition—only five pounds more than he had expected to give.

But he felt a little worried and wearied, perhaps with mental debate, and without waiting for the further gaieties of the horse-fair, he set out alone on his fourteen miles' journey, meaning to take it very quietly and keep his horse fresh.

CHAPTER 24

The offender's sorrow brings but small relief
To him who wears the strong offence's cross.

—SHAKESPEARE: *Sonnets*

I am sorry to say that only the third day after the propitious events at Houndsley Fred Vincy had fallen into worse spirits than he had known in his life before. Not that he had been disappointed as to the possible market for his horse, but that before the bargain could be concluded with Lord Medlicote's man, this Diamond, in which hope to the amount of eighty pounds had been invested, had without the slightest warning exhibited in the stable a most vicious energy in kicking, had just missed killing the groom, and had ended in laming himself severely by catching his leg in a rope that overhung the stable-board. There was no more redress for this than for the discovery of bad temper after marriage—which of course old companions were aware of before the ceremony. For some reason or other Fred had none of his usual elasticity under this stroke of ill fortune: he was simply aware that he had only fifty pounds, that there was no chance of his getting any more at present, and that the bill for a hundred and sixty would be presented in five days. Even if he had applied to his father on the plea that Mr. Garth should be saved from loss, Fred felt smartingly that his father would angrily refuse to rescue Mr. Garth from the consequence of what he would call encouraging extravagance and deceit. He was so utterly downcast that he could frame no other project than to go straight to Mr. Garth and tell him the sad truth, carrying with him the fifty pounds and getting that sum at least safely out of his own hands. His father, being at the warehouse, did not yet know of the accident; when he did, he would storm about the vicious brute being brought into his stable, and before meeting that lesser annoyance, Fred wanted to get away with all his courage to face the greater. He took his father's nag, for he had made up his mind that when he had told Mr. Garth, he would ride to Stone Court and confess all to Mary. In fact, it is probable that but for Mary's existence and Fred's love for her, his conscience would have been much less active both in previously urging the debt on his thought and in impelling him not to spare himself after his usual fashion by deferring an unpleasant task, but to act as directly and simply as he could. Even much stronger mortals than Fred Vincy hold half their rectitude in the mind of the being they love best. "The theatre of all my actions is fallen," said an antique personage when his chief friend was dead; and they are fortunate who get a theatre where the audience demands their best. Certainly it would have made a considerable difference to Fred at that time if Mary Garth had had no decided notions as to what was admirable in character.

Mr. Garth was not at the office, and Fred rode on to his house, which was a little way outside the town—a homely place with an orchard in front of it, a rambling, old-fashioned, half-timbered building which before the town had spread had been a farmhouse but was now surrounded with the private gardens of the townsmen. We get the fonder of our houses if they have a physiognomy of their own, as our friends have. The Garth family, which was rather a large one, for Mary had four brothers and one sister, were very fond of their old house, from which all the best furniture had long been sold. Fred liked it too, knowing it by heart even to the attic, which smelt deliciously of apples and quinces, and until today he had never come to it without pleasant expectations; but his heart beat uneasily now with the sense that he should probably have to make his confession before Mrs. Garth, of whom he was rather more in awe than of her husband. Not that she was inclined to sarcasm and to impulsive sallies as Mary was. In her present matronly age at least, Mrs. Garth never committed herself by over-hasty speech, having as she said, borne the yoke in her youth and learned self-control. She had that rare sense which discerns what is unalterable and submits to it without murmuring. Adoring her husband's virtues, she had very early made up her mind to his incapacity of minding his own interests and had met the consequences cheerfully. She had been magnanimous enough to renounce all pride in tea-pots or children's frilling, and had never poured any pathetic confidences into the ears of her feminine neighbours concerning Mr. Garth's want of prudence and the sums he might have had if he had been like other men. Hence these fair neighbours thought her either proud or eccentric and sometimes spoke of her to their husbands as "your fine Mrs. Garth." She was not without her criticism of them in return, being more accurately instructed than most matrons in Middlemarch, and—where is the blameless woman?—apt to be a little severe towards her own sex, which in her opinion was framed to be entirely subordinate. On the other hand, she was disproportionately indulgent towards the failings of men, and was often heard to say that these were natural. Also, it must be admitted that Mrs. Garth was a trifle too emphatic in her resistance to what she held to be follies: the passage from governess into housewife had wrought itself a little too strongly into her consciousness, and she rarely forgot that while her grammar and accent were above the town standard, she wore a plain cap, cooked the family dinner, and darned all the stockings. She had sometimes taken pupils in a peripatetic fashion, making them follow her about in the kitchen with their book or slate. She thought it good for them to see that she could make an excellent lather while she corrected their blunders "without looking," that a woman with her sleeves tucked up above her elbows might know all about the subjunctive mood or the torrid zone, that, in short, she might possess "education" and other good things ending in "-tion," and worthy to be pronounced emphatically, without being a useless doll. When she made remarks to this edifying effect, she had a firm little frown on her brow, which yet did not hinder her face from looking benevolent, and her words, which came forth like a procession, were uttered in a fervid, agreeable contralto. Certainly the exemplary Mrs. Garth had her

droll aspects, but her character sustained her oddities, as a very fine wine sustains a flavour of skin.

Towards Fred Vincy she had a motherly feeling and had always been disposed to excuse his errors, though she would probably not have excused Mary for engaging herself to him, her daughter being included in that more rigorous judgement which she applied to her own sex. But this very fact of her exceptional indulgence towards him made it the harder to Fred that he must now inevitably sink in her opinion. And the circumstances of his visit turned out to be still more unpleasant than he had expected, for Caleb Garth had gone out early to look at some repairs not far off. Mrs. Garth at certain hours was always in the kitchen, and this morning she was carrying on several occupations at once there—making her pies at the well-scoured deal table on one side of that airy room, observing Sally's movements at the oven and dough-tub through an open door, and giving lessons to her youngest boy and girl, who were standing opposite to her at the table with their books and slates before them. A tub and a clothes-horse at the other end of the kitchen indicated an intermittent wash of small things also going on.

Mrs. Garth, with her sleeves turned above her elbows, deftly handling her pastry—applying her rolling-pin and giving ornamental pinches—while she expounded with grammatical fervour what were the right views about the concord of verbs and pronouns with "nouns of multitude or signifying many" was a sight agreeably amusing. She was of the same curly-haired, square-faced type as Mary, but handsomer, with more delicacy of feature, a pale skin, a solid matronly figure, and a remarkable firmness of glance. In her snowy-frilled cap she reminded one of that delightful Frenchwoman whom we have all seen marketing, basket on arm. Looking at the mother, you might hope that the daughter would become like her, which is a prospective advantage equal to a dowry—the mother too often standing behind the daughter like a malignant prophecy —"Such as I am, she will shortly be."

"Now let us go through that once more," said Mrs. Garth, pinching an apple-puff which seemed to distract Ben, an energetic young male with a heavy brow, from due attention to the lesson. "'Not without regard to the import of the word as conveying unity or plurality of idea'—tell me again what that means, Ben." (Mrs. Garth, like more celebrated educators, had her favourite ancient paths, and in a general wreck of society would have tried to hold her 'Lindley Murray' above the waves.)

"Oh—it means—you must think what you mean," said Ben, rather peevishly. "I hate grammar. What's the use of it?"

"To teach you to speak and write correctly so that you can be understood," said Mrs. Garth with severe precision. "Should you like to speak as old Job does?"

"Yes," said Ben stoutly; "it's funnier. He says, 'Yo goo'—that's just as good as 'You go.'"

"But he says, 'A ship's in the garden,' instead of 'a sheep,'" said Letty with an air of superiority. "You might think he meant a ship off the sea."

"No, you mightn't, if you weren't silly," said Ben. "How could a ship off the sea come there?"

"These things belong only to pronunciation, which is the least part of grammar," said Mrs. Garth. "That apple-peel is to be eaten by the pigs, Ben; if you eat it, I must give them your piece of pastry. Job has only to speak about very plain things. How do you think you would write or speak about anything more difficult if you knew no more of grammar than he does? You would use wrong words, and put words in the wrong places, and instead of making people understand you, they would turn away from you as a tiresome person. What would you do then?"

"I shouldn't care, I should leave off," said Ben with a sense that this was an agreeable issue where grammar was concerned.

"I see you are getting tired and stupid, Ben," said Mrs. Garth, accustomed to these obstructive arguments from her male offspring. Having finished her pies, she moved towards the clothes-horse and said, "Come here and tell me the story I told you on Wednesday, about Cincinnatus."

"I know! He was a farmer," said Ben.

"Now, Ben, he was a Roman—let *me* tell," said Letty, using her elbow contentiously.

"You silly thing, he was a Roman farmer, and he was ploughing."

"Yes, but before that—that didn't come first—people wanted him," said Letty.

"Well, but you must say what sort of a man he was first," insisted Ben. "He was a wise man, like my father, and that made the people want his advice. And he was a brave man and could fight. And so could my father—couldn't he, Mother?"

"Now, Ben, let me tell the story straight on, as Mother told it us," said Letty, frowning. "Please, Mother, tell Ben not to speak."

"Letty, I am ashamed of you," said her mother, wringing out the caps from the tub. "When your brother began, you ought to have waited to see if he could not tell the story. How rude you look, pushing and frowning as if you wanted to conquer with your elbows! Cincinnatus, I am sure, would have been sorry to see his daughter behave so." (Mrs. Garth delivered this awful sentence with much majesty of enunciation, and Letty felt that between repressed volubility and general disesteem, that of the Romans inclusive, life was already a painful affair.) "Now, Ben."

"Well—oh—well—why, there was a great deal of fighting, and they were all blockheads, and—I can't tell it just how you told it—but they wanted a man to be captain and king and everything—"

"Dictator, now," said Letty with injured looks and not without a wish to make her mother repent.

"Very well, dictator!" said Ben contemptuously. "But that isn't a good word: he didn't tell them to write on slates."

"Come, come, Ben, you are not so ignorant as that," said Mrs. Garth, carefully serious. "Hark, there is a knock at the door! Run, Letty, and open it."

The knock was Fred's; and when Letty said that her father was not in yet, but that her mother was in the kitchen, Fred had no alternative. He could not depart from his usual practice of going to see Mrs. Garth in the kitchen if she happened to be at work there. He put his arm round Letty's neck silently and led her into the kitchen without his usual jokes and caresses.

Mrs. Garth was surprised to see Fred at this hour, but surprise was not a feeling that she was given to express, and she only said, quietly continuing her work, "You, Fred, so early in the day? You look quite pale. Has anything happened?"

"I want to speak to Mr. Garth," said Fred, not yet ready to say more. "And to you also," he added after a little pause, for

he had no doubt that Mrs. Garth knew everything about the bill, and he must in the end speak of it before her, if not to her solely.

"Caleb will be in again in a few minutes," said Mrs. Garth, who imagined some trouble between Fred and his father. "He is sure not to be long because he has some work at his desk that must be done this morning. Do you mind staying with me while I finish my matters here?"

"But we needn't go on about Cincinnatus, need we?" said Ben, who had taken Fred's whip out of his hand and was trying its efficiency on the cat.

"No, go out now. But put that whip down. How very mean of you to whip poor old Tortoise! Pray take the whip from him, Fred."

"Come, old boy, give it me," said Fred, putting out his hand.

"Will you let me ride on your horse today?" said Ben, rendering up the whip with an air of not being obliged to do it.

"Not today—another time. I am not riding my own horse."

"Shall you see Mary today?"

"Yes, I think so," said Fred with an unpleasant twinge.

"Tell her to come home soon, and play at forfeits, and make fun."

"Enough, enough, Ben! Run away," said Mrs. Garth, seeing that Fred was teased.

"Are Letty and Ben your only pupils now, Mrs. Garth?" said Fred when the children were gone and it was needful to say something that would pass the time. He was not yet sure whether he should wait for Mr. Garth or use any good opportunity in conversation to confess to Mrs. Garth herself, give her the money and ride away.

"One—only one. Fanny Hackbutt comes at half past eleven. I am not getting a great income now," said Mrs. Garth, smiling. "I am at a low ebb with pupils. But I have saved my little purse for Alfred's premium; I have ninety-two pounds. He can go to Mr. Hanmer's now; he is just at the right age."

This did not lead well towards the news that Mr. Garth was on the brink of losing ninety-two pounds and more. Fred was silent. "Young gentlemen who go to college are rather more costly than that," Mrs. Garth innocently continued, pulling out the edging on a cap-border. "And Caleb thinks that Alfred will turn out a distinguished engineer; he wants to give the boy a good chance. There he is! I hear him coming in. We will go to him in the parlour, shall we?"

When they entered the parlour Caleb had thrown down his hat and was seated at his desk.

"What, Fred, my boy?" he said in a tone of mild surprise, holding his pen still undipped. "You are here betimes." But missing the usual expression of cheerful greeting in Fred's face, he immediately added, "Is there anything up at home—anything the matter?"

"Yes, Mr. Garth, I am come to tell something that I am afraid will give you a bad opinion of me. I am come to tell you and Mrs. Garth that I can't keep my word. I can't find the money to meet the bill after all. I have been unfortunate; I have only got these fifty pounds towards the hundred and sixty."

While Fred was speaking, he had taken out the notes and laid them on the desk before Mr. Garth. He had burst forth at once with the plain fact, feeling boyishly miserable and without verbal resources. Mrs. Garth was mutely astonished and looked at her husband for an explanation. Caleb blushed, and after a little pause said, "Oh, I didn't tell you, Susan: I put my name to a bill for Fred; it was for a hundred and sixty pounds. He made sure he could meet it himself."

There was an evident change in Mrs. Garth's face, but it was like a change below the surface of water which remains smooth. She fixed her eyes on Fred, saying, "I suppose you have asked your father for the rest of the money and he has refused you."

"No," said Fred, biting his lip and speaking with more difficulty; "but I know it will be of no use to ask him; and unless it were of use, I should not like to mention Mr. Garth's name in the matter."

"It has come at an unfortunate time," said Caleb in his hesitating way, looking down at the notes and nervously fingering the paper. "Christmas upon us—I'm rather hard up just now. You see, I have to cut out everything like a tailor with short measure. What can we do, Susan? I shall want every farthing we have in the bank. It's a hundred and ten pounds, the deuce take it!"

"I must give you the ninety-two pounds that I have put by for Alfred's premium," said Mrs. Garth gravely and decisively, though a nice ear might have discerned a slight tremor in some of the words. "And I have no doubt that Mary has twenty pounds saved from her salary by this time. She will advance it."

Mrs. Garth had not again looked at Fred and was not in the least calculating what words she should use to cut him the most effectively. Like the eccentric woman she was, she was at present absorbed in considering what was to be done and did not fancy that the end could be better achieved by bitter remarks or explosions. But she had made Fred feel for the first time something like the tooth of remorse. Curiously enough, his pain in the affair beforehand had consisted almost entirely in the sense that he must seem dishonourable and sink in the opinion of the Garths: he had not occupied himself with the inconvenience and possible injury that his breach might occasion them, for this exercise of the imagination on other people's needs is not common with hopeful young gentlemen. Indeed we are most of us brought up in the notion that the highest motive for not doing a wrong is something irrespective of the beings who would suffer the wrong. But at this moment he suddenly saw himself as a pitiful rascal who was robbing two women of their savings.

"I shall certainly pay it all, Mrs. Garth—ultimately," he stammered out.

"Yes, ultimately," said Mrs. Garth, who, having a special dislike to fine words on ugly occasions, could not now repress an epigram. "But boys cannot well be apprenticed ultimately; they should be apprenticed at fifteen." She had never been so little inclined to make excuses for Fred.

"I was the most in the wrong, Susan," said Caleb. "Fred made sure of finding the money. But I'd no business to be fingering bills. I suppose you have looked all round and tried all honest means?" he added, fixing his merciful grey eyes on Fred. Caleb was too delicate to specify Mr. Featherstone.

"Yes, I have tried everything—I really have. I should have had a hundred and thirty pounds ready but for a misfortune with a horse which I was about to sell. My uncle had given me eighty pounds, and I paid away thirty with my old horse in

order to get another which I was going to sell for eighty or more—I meant to go without a horse—but now it has turned out vicious and lamed itself. I wish I and the horses too had been at the devil before I had brought this on you. There's no one else I care so much for: you and Mrs. Garth have always been so kind to me. However, it's no use saying that. You will always think me a rascal now."

Fred turned round and hurried out of the room, conscious that he was getting rather womanish and feeling confusedly that his being sorry was not of much use to the Garths. They could see him mount and quickly pass through the gate.

"I am disappointed in Fred Vincy," said Mrs. Garth. "I would not have believed beforehand that he would have drawn you into his debts. I know he was extravagant, but I did not think that he would be so mean as to hang his risks on his oldest friend, who could the least afford to lose."

"I was a fool, Susan."

"That you were," said the wife, nodding and smiling. "But I should not have gone to publish it in the marketplace. Why should you keep such things from me? It is just so with your buttons; you let them burst off without telling me and go out with your wristband hanging. If I had only known I might have been ready with some better plan."

"You are sadly cut up, I know, Susan," said Caleb, looking feelingly at her. "I can't abide your losing the money you've scraped together for Alfred."

"It is very well that I *had* scraped it together; and it is you who will have to suffer, for you must teach the boy yourself. You must give up your bad habits. Some men take to drinking, and you have taken to working without pay. You must indulge yourself a little less in that. And you must ride over to Mary and ask the child what money she has."

Caleb had pushed his chair back and was leaning forward, shaking his head slowly, and fitting his finger-tips together with much nicety.

"Poor Mary!" he said. "Susan," he went on in a lowered tone, "I'm afraid she may be fond of Fred."

"Oh no! She always laughs at him, and he is not likely to think of her in any other than a brotherly way."

Caleb made no rejoinder, but presently lowered his spectacles, drew up his chair to the desk, and said, "Deuce take the bill—I wish it was at Hanover! These things are a sad interruption to business!"

The first part of this speech comprised his whole store of maledictory expression, and was uttered with a slight snarl easy to imagine. But it would be difficult to convey to those who never heard him utter the word "business" the peculiar tone of fervid veneration, of religious regard, in which he wrapped it, as a consecrated symbol is wrapped in its gold-fringed linen.

Caleb Garth often shook his head in meditation on the value, the indispensible might of that myriad-headed, myriad-handed labour by which the social body is fed, clothed, and housed. It had laid hold of his imagination in boyhood. The echoes of the great hammer where roof or keel were a-making, the signal-shouts of the workmen, the roar of the furnace, the thunder and plash of the engine, were a sublime music to him; the felling and lading of timber, and the huge trunk vibrating star-like in the distance along the highway, the crane at work on the wharf, the piled-up produce in warehouses, the precision and variety of muscular effort wherever exact work had to be turned out—all these sights of his youth had acted on him as poetry without the aid of the poets, had made a philosophy for him without the aid of philosophers, a religion without the aid of theology. His early ambition had been to have as effective a share as possible in this sublime labour, which was peculiarly dignified by him with the name of "business"; and though he had only been a short time under a surveyor and had been chiefly his own teacher, he knew more of land, building, and mining than most of the special men in the county.

His classification of human employments was rather crude, and like the categories of more celebrated men, would not be acceptable in these advanced times. He divided them into "business, politics, preaching, learning, and amusement." He had nothing to say against the last four, but he regarded them as a reverential pagan regarded other gods than his own. In the same way, he thought very well of all ranks, but he would not himself have liked to be of any rank in which he had not such close contact with "business" as to get often honourably decorated with marks of dust and mortar, the damp of the engine, or the sweet soil of the woods and fields. Though he had never regarded himself as other than an orthodox Christian, and would argue on prevenient grace if the subject were proposed to him, I think his virtual divinities were good practical schemes, accurate work, and the faithful completion of undertakings; his prince of darkness was a slack workman. But there was no spirit of denial in Caleb, and the world seemed so wondrous to him that he was ready to accept any number of systems, like any number of firmaments, if they did not obviously interfere with the best land-drainage, solid building, correct measuring, and judicious boring (for coal). In fact, he had a reverential soul with a strong practical intelligence. But he could not manage finance; he knew values well, but he had no keenness of imagination for monetary results in the shape of profit and loss, and having ascertained this to his cost, he determined to give up all forms of his beloved "business" which required that talent. He gave himself up entirely to the many kinds of work which he could do without handling capital, and was one of those precious men within his own district whom everybody would choose to work for them because he did his work well, charged very little, and often declined to charge at all. It is no wonder, then, that the Garths were poor and "lived in a small way." However, they did not mind it.

CHAPTER 25

Love seeketh not itself to please,
    Nor for itself hath any care,
But for another gives its ease,
    And builds a heaven in hell's despair.

. . . . . .

Love seeketh only self to please,
    To bind another to its delight,
Joys in another's loss of ease,
    And builds a hell in heaven's despite.

—W. BLAKE: *Songs of Experience*

Fred Vincy wanted to arrive at Stone Court when Mary could not expect him; and when his uncle was not downstairs; in that case she might be sitting alone in the wainscoated parlour. He left his horse in the yard to avoid making a noise on the gravel in front and entered the parlour without other notice than the noise of the door-handle. Mary was in her usual corner, laughing over Mrs. Piozzi's recollections of Johnson, and looked up with the fun still in her face. It gradually faded as she saw Fred approach her without speaking and stand before her with his elbow on the mantelpiece, looking ill. She too was silent, only raising her eyes to him inquiringly.

"Mary," he began, "I am a good-for-nothing blackguard."

"I should think one of those epithets would do at a time," said Mary, trying to smile but feeling alarmed.

"I know you will never think well of me any more. You will think me a liar. You will think me dishonest. You will think I didn't care for you or your father and mother. You always do make the worst of me, I know."

"I cannot deny that I shall think all that of you, Fred, if you give me good reasons. But please to tell me at once what you have done. I would rather know the painful truth than imagine it."

"I owed money—a hundred and sixty pounds. I asked your father to put his name to a bill. I thought it would not signify to him. I made sure of paying the money myself, and I have tried as hard as I could. And now, I have been so unlucky—a horse has turned out badly—I can only pay fifty pounds. And I can't ask my father for the money; he would not give me a farthing. And my uncle gave me a hundred a little while ago. So what can I do? And now your father has no ready money to spare, and your mother will have to pay away her ninety-two pounds that she has saved, and she says your savings must go too. You see what a—"

"Oh, poor Mother, poor Father!" said Mary, her eyes filling with tears and a little sob rising, which she tried to repress. She looked straight before her and took no notice of Fred, all the consequences at home becoming present to her. He too remained silent for some moments, feeling more miserable than ever.

"I wouldn't have hurt you so for the world, Mary," he said at last. "You can never forgive me."

"What does it matter whether I forgive you?" said Mary passionately. "Would that make it any better for my mother to lose the money she has been earning by lessons for four years that she might send Alfred to Mr. Hanmer's? Should you think all that pleasant enough if I forgave you?"

"Say what you like Mary. I deserve it all."

"I don't want to say anything," said Mary more quietly; "my anger is of no use." She dried her eyes, threw aside her book, rose and fetched her sewing.

Fred followed her with his eyes, hoping that they would meet hers and in that way find access for his imploring penitence. But no! Mary could easily avoid looking upward.

"I do care about your mother's money going," he said when she was seated again and sewing quickly. "I wanted to ask you, Mary—don't you think that Mr. Featherstone—if you were to tell him—tell him, I mean, about apprenticing Alfred—would advance the money?"

"My family is not fond of begging, Fred. We would rather work for our money. Besides, you say that Mr. Featherstone has lately given you a hundred pounds. He rarely makes presents; he has never made presents to us. I am sure my father will not ask him for anything; and even if I chose to beg of him, it would be of no use."

"I am so miserable, Mary—if you knew how miserable I am, you would be sorry for me."

"There are other things to be more sorry for than that. But selfish people always think their own discomfort of more importance than anything else in the world: I see enough of that every day."

"It is hardly fair to call me selfish. If you knew what things other young men do, you would think me a good way off the worst."

"I know that people who spend a great deal of money on themselves without knowing how they shall pay must be selfish. They are always thinking of what they can get for themselves, and not of what other people may lose."

"Any man may be unfortunate, Mary, and find himself unable to pay when he meant it. There is not a better man in the world than your father, and yet he got into trouble."

"How dare you make any comparision between my father and you, Fred?" said Mary, in a deep tone of indignation. "He

never got into trouble by thinking of his own idle pleasures, but because he was always thinking of the work he was doing for other people. And he has fared hard, and worked hard to make good everybody's loss."

"And you think that I shall never try to make good anything, Mary. It is not generous to believe the worst of a man. When you have got any power over him, I think you might try and use it to make him better; but that is what you never do. However, I'm going," Fred ended languidly. "I shall never speak to you about anything again. I'm very sorry for all the trouble I've caused—that's all."

Mary had dropped her work out of her hand and looked up. There is often something maternal even in a girlish love, and Mary's hard experience had wrought her nature to an impressibility very different from that hard, slight thing which we call girlishness. At Fred's last words she felt an instantaneous pang, something like what a mother feels at the imagined sobs or cries of her naughty truant child, which may lose itself and get harm. And when, looking up, her eyes met his dull, despairing glance, her pity for him surmounted her anger and all her other anxieties.

"Oh, Fred, how ill you look! Sit down a moment. Don't go yet. Let me tell Uncle that you are here. He has been wondering that he has not seen you for a whole week." Mary spoke hurriedly, saying the words that came first without knowing very well what they were, but saying them in a half-soothing, half-beseeching tone and rising as if to go away to Mr. Featherstone. Of course Fred felt as if the clouds had parted and a gleam had come; he moved and stood in her way.

"Say one word, Mary, and I will do anything. Say you will not think the worst of me—will not give me up altogether."

"As if it were any pleasure to me to think ill of you," said Mary in a mournful tone. "As if it were not very painful to me to see you an idle, frivolous creature. How can you bear to be so contemptible when others are working and striving and there are so many things to be done—how can you bear to be fit for nothing in the world that is useful? And with so much good in your disposition, Fred, you might be worth a great deal."

"I will try to be anything you like, Mary, if you will say that you love me."

"I should be ashamed to say that I loved a man who must always be hanging on others and reckoning on what they would do for him. What will you be when you are forty? Like Mr. Bowyer, I suppose—just as idle, living in Mrs. Beck's front parlour—fat and shabby, hoping somebody will invite you to dinner—spending your morning in learning a comic song—oh no!—learning a tune on the flute."

Mary's lips had begun to curl with a smile as soon as she had asked that question about Fred's future (young souls are mobile), and before she ended, her face had its full illumination of fun. To him it was like the cessation of an ache that Mary could laugh at him, and with a passive sort of smile he tried to reach her hand; but she slipped away quickly towards the door and said, "I shall tell Uncle. You *must* see him for a moment or two."

Fred secretly felt that his future was guaranteed against the fulfilment of Mary's sarcastic prophecies, apart from that "anything" which he was ready to do if she would define it. He never dared in Mary's presence to approach the subject of his expectations from Mr. Featherstone, and she always ignored them as if everything depended on himself. But if ever he actually came into the property, she must recognize the change in his position. All this passed through his mind somewhat languidly before he went up to see his uncle. He stayed but a little while, excusing himself on the ground that he had a cold; and Mary did not reappear before he left the house. But as he rode home, he began to be more conscious of being ill than of being melancholy.

When Caleb Garth arrived at Stone Court soon after dusk, Mary was not surprised, although he seldom had leisure for paying her a visit and was not at all fond of having to talk with Mr. Featherstone. The old man, on the other hand, felt himself ill at ease with a brother-in-law whom he could not annoy, who did not mind about being considered poor, had nothing to ask of him, and understood all kinds of farming and mining business better than he did. But Mary had felt sure that her parents would want to see her, and if her father had not come, she would have obtained leave to go home for an hour or two the next day. After discussing prices during tea with Mr. Featherstone, Caleb rose to bid him good-bye and said, "I want to speak to you, Mary."

She took a candle into another large parlour, where there was no fire, and setting down the feeble light on the dark mahogany table, turned round to her father, and putting her arms round his neck, kissed him with childish kisses which he delighted in, the expression of his large brows softening as the expression of a great beautiful dog softens when it is caressed. Mary was his favourite child, and whatever Susan might say, and right as she was on all other subjects, Caleb thought it natural that Fred or anyone else should think Mary more lovable than other girls.

"I've got something to tell you, my dear," said Caleb in his hesitating way. "No very good news, but then it might be worse."

"About money, Father? I think I know what it is."

"Ay? How can that be? You see, I've been a bit of a fool again, and put my name to a bill, and now it comes to paying; and your mother has got to part with her savings, that's the worst of it, and even they won't quite make things even. We wanted a hundred and ten pounds; your mother has ninety-two, and I have none to spare in the bank, and she thinks that you will have some savings."

"Oh yes; I have more than four-and-twenty pounds. I thought you would come, Father, so I put it in my bag. See! Beautiful white notes and gold."

Mary took out the folded money from her reticule and put it into her father's hand.

"Well, but how—we only want eighteen; here, put the rest back, child—but how did you know about it?" said Caleb, who, in his unconquerable indifference to money, was beginning to be chiefly concerned about the relation the affair might have to Mary's affections.

"Fred told me this morning."

"Ah! Did he come on purpose?"

"Yes, I think so. He was a good deal distressed."

"I'm afraid Fred is not to be trusted, Mary," said the father with hesitating tenderness. "He means better than he acts, perhaps. But I should think it a pity for anybody's happiness to be wrapped up in him, and so would your mother."

"And so should I, Father," said Mary, not looking up, but putting the back of her father's hand against her cheek.

“I don’t want to pry, my dear. But I was afraid there might be something between you and Fred, and I wanted to caution you. You see, Mary”—here Caleb’s voice became more tender; he had been pushing his hat about on the table and looking at it, but finally he turned his eyes on his daughter—“a woman, let her be as good as she may, has got to put up with the life her husband makes for her. Your mother has had to put up with a good deal because of me.”

Mary turned the back of her father’s hand to her lips and smiled at him.

“Well, well, nobody’s perfect, but”—here Mr. Garth shook his head to help out the inadequacy of words—“what I am thinking of is—what it must be for a wife when she’s never sure of her husband, when he hasn’t got a principle in him to make him more afraid of doing the wrong thing by others than of getting his own toes pinched. That’s the long and short of it, Mary. Young folks may get fond of each other before they know what life is, and they may think it all holiday if they can only get together; but it soon turns into working day, my dear. However, you have more sense than most, and you haven’t been kept in cotton-wool; there may be no occasion for me to say this, but a father trembles for his daughter, and you are all by yourself here.”

“Don’t fear for me, Father,” said Mary, gravely meeting her father’s eyes; “Fred has always been very good to me; he is kind-hearted and affectionate, and not false, I think, with all his self-indulgence. But I will never engage myself to one who has no manly independence and who goes on loitering away his time on the chance that others will provide for him. You and my mother have taught me too much pride for that.”

“That’s right—that’s right. Then I am easy,” said Mr. Garth, taking up his hat. “But it’s hard to run away with your earnings, child.”

“Father!” said Mary in her deepest tone of remonstrance. “Take pocketfuls of love besides to them all at home,” was her last word before he closed the outer door on himself.

“I suppose your father wanted your earnings,” said old Mr. Featherstone with his usual power of unpleasant surmise when Mary returned to him. “He makes but a tight fit, I reckon. You’re of age now; you ought to be saving for yourself.”

“I consider my father and mother the best part of myself, sir,” said Mary coldly.

Mr. Featherstone grunted; he could not deny that an ordinary sort of girl like her might be expected to be useful, so he thought of another rejoinder, disagreeable enough to be always apropos. “If Fred Vincy comes tomorrow, now, don’t you keep him chattering; let him come up to me.”

CHAPTER 26

> He beats me and I rail at him: O worthy satisfaction! would it were otherwise—that I could beat him while he railed at me.
>
> —*Troilus and Cressida*

But Fred did not go to Stone Court the next day, for reasons that were quite peremptory. From those visits to unsanitary Houndsley streets in search of Diamond, he had brought back not only a bad bargain in horse-flesh, but the further misfortune of some ailment which for a day or two had seemed mere depression and headache, but which got so much worse when he returned from his visit to Stone Court that, going into the dining-room, he threw himself on the sofa and in answer to his mother's anxious question said, "I feel very ill; I think you must send for Wrench."

Wrench came but did not apprehend anything serious, spoke of a "slight derangement," and did not speak of coming again on the morrow. He had a due value for the Vincys' house, but the wariest men are apt to be a little dulled by routine, and on worried mornings will sometimes go through their business with the zest of the daily bell-ringer. Mr. Wrench was a small, neat, bilious man, with a well-dressed wig: he had a laborious practice, an irascible temper, a lymphatic wife, and seven children, and he was already rather late before setting out on a four-miles' drive to meet Dr. Minchin on the other side of Tipton, the decease of Hicks, a rural practitioner, having increased Middlemarch practice in that direction. Great statesmen err, and why not small medical men? Mr. Wrench did not neglect sending the usual white parcels, which this time had black and drastic contents. Their effect was not alleviating to poor Fred, who, however, unwilling as he said to believe that he was "in for an illness," rose at his usual easy hour the next morning and went downstairs meaning to breakfast, but succeeded in nothing but in sitting and shivering by the fire. Mr. Wrench was again sent for, but was gone on his rounds, and Mrs. Vincy, seeing her darling's changed looks and general misery, began to cry and said she would send for Dr. Sprague.

"Oh, nonsense, Mother! It's nothing," said Fred, putting out his hot dry hand to her; "I shall soon be all right. I must have taken cold in that nasty damp ride."

"Mamma!" said Rosamond, who was seated near the window (the dining-room windows looked on that highly respectable street called Lowick Gate); "there is Mr. Lydgate, stopping to speak to someone. If I were you I would call him in. He has cured Ellen Bulstrode. They say he cures everyone."

Mrs. Vincy sprang to the window and opened it in an instant, thinking only of Fred and not of medical etiquette. Lydgate was only two yards off on the other side of some iron palisading and turned round at the sudden sound of the sash, before she called to him. In two minutes he was in the room, and Rosamond went out after waiting just long enough to show a pretty anxiety conflicting with her sense of what was becoming.

Lydgate had to hear a narrative in which Mrs. Vincy's mind insisted with remarkable instinct on every point of minor importance, especially on what Mr. Wrench had said and had not said about coming again. That there might be an awkward affair with Wrench, Lydgate saw at once, but the case was serious enough to make him dismiss that consideration: he was convinced that Fred was in the pink-skinned stage of typhoid fever and that he had taken just the wrong medicines. He must go to bed immediately, must have a regular nurse, and various appliances and precautions must be used, about which Lydgate was particular. Poor Mrs. Vincy's terror at these indications of danger found vent in such words as came most easily. She thought it "very ill usage on the part of Mr. Wrench, who had attended their house so many years in preference to Mr. Peacock, though Mr. Peacock was equally a friend." Why Mr. Wrench should neglect her children more than others, she could not for the life of her understand. He had not neglected Mrs. Larcher's when they had the measles, nor indeed should Mrs. Vincy have wished that he should. And if anything should happen—

Here poor Mrs. Vincy's spirit quite broke down, and her Niobe-throat and good-humoured face were sadly convulsed. This was in the hall out of Fred's hearing, but Rosamond had opened the drawing-room door and now came forward anxiously. Lydgate apologized for Mr. Wrench, said that the symptoms yesterday might have been disguising, and that this form of fever was very equivocal in its beginnings: he would go immediately to the druggist's and have a prescription made up in order to lose no time, but he would write to Mr. Wrench and tell him what had been done.

"But you must come again—you must go on attending Fred. I can't have my boy left to anybody who may come or not. I bear nobody ill will, thank God, and Mr. Wrench saved me in the pleurisy, but he'd better have let me die—if—if—"

"I will meet Mr. Wrench here, then, shall I?" said Lydgate, really believing that Wrench was not well prepared to deal wisely with a case of this kind.

"Pray make that arrangement, Mr. Lydgate," said Rosamond, coming to her mother's aid and supporting her arm to lead her away.

When Mr. Vincy came home he was very angry with Wrench, and did not care if he never came into his house again. Lydgate should go on now, whether Wrench liked it or not. It was no joke to have fever in the house. Everybody must be sent to now, not to come to dinner on Thursday. And Pritchard needn't get up any wine: brandy was the best thing against infection. "I shall drink brandy," added Mr. Vincy emphatically—as much as to say, this was not an occasion for firing with blank-cartridges. "He's an uncommonly unfortunate lad, is Fred. He'd need have some luck by and by to make up for all

this—else I don't know who'd have an eldest son."

"Don't say so, Vincy," said the mother with a quivering lip, "if you don't want him to be taken from me."

"It will worret you to death, Lucy; *that* I can see," said Mr. Vincy more mildly. "However, Wrench shall know what I think of the matter." (What Mr. Vincy thought confusedly was that the fever might somehow have been hindered if Wrench had shown the proper solicitude about his—the mayor's—family.) "I'm the last man to give in to the cry about new doctors or new parsons, either—whether they're Bulstrode's men or not. But Wrench shall know what I think, take it as he will."

Wrench did not take it at all well. Lydgate was as polite as he could be in his offhand way, but politeness in a man who has placed you at a disadvantage is only an additional exasperation, especially if he happens to have been an object of dislike beforehand. Country practitioners used to be an irritable species, susceptible on the point of honour, and Mr. Wrench was one of the most irritable among them. He did not refuse to meet Lydgate in the evening, but his temper was somewhat tried on the occasion. He had to hear Mrs. Vincy say, "Oh, Mr. Wrench, what have I ever done that you should use me so? To go away, and never to come again! And my boy might have been stretched a corpse!"

Mr. Vincy, who had been keeping up a sharp fire on the enemy infection and was a good deal heated in consequence, started up when he heard Wrench come in and went into the hall to let him know what he thought.

"I'll tell you what, Wrench, this is beyond a joke," said the mayor, who of late had had to rebuke offenders with an official air, and now broadened himself by putting his thumbs in his armholes. "To let fever get unawares into a house like this. There are some things that ought to be actionable and are not so—that's my opinion."

But irrational reproaches were easier to bear than the sense of being instructed, or rather the sense that a younger man, like Lydgate, inwardly considered him in need of instruction, for "in point of fact," Mr. Wrench afterwards said, Lydgate paraded flighty, foreign notions, which would not wear. He swallowed his ire for the moment, but he afterwards wrote to decline further attendance in the case. The house might be a good one, but Mr. Wrench was not going to truckle to anybody on a professional matter. He reflected, with much probability on his side, that Lydgate would by and by be caught tripping too and that his ungentlemanly attempts to discredit the sale of drugs by his professional brethren would by and by recoil on himself. He threw out biting remarks on Lydgate's tricks, worthy only of a quack, to get himself a factitious reputation with credulous people. That cant about cures was never got up by sound practitioners.

This was a point on which Lydgate smarted as much as Wrench could desire. To be puffed by ignorance was not only humiliating, but perilous, and not more enviable than the reputation of the weather-prophet. He was impatient of the foolish expectations amidst which all work must be carried on, and likely enough to damage himself as much as Mr. Wrench could wish by an unprofessional openness.

However, Lydgate was installed as medical attendant on the Vincys, and the event was a subject of general conversation in Middlemarch. Some said that the Vincys had behaved scandalously, that Mr. Vincy had threatened Wrench, and that Mrs. Vincy had accused him of poisoning her son. Others were of opinion that Mr. Lydgate's passing by was providential, that he was wonderfully clever in fevers, and that Bulstrode was in the right to bring him forward. Many people believed that Lydgate's coming to the town at all was really due to Bulstrode; and Mrs. Taft, who was always counting stitches and gathered her information in misleading fragments caught between the rows of her knitting, had got it into her head that Mr. Lydgate was a natural son of Bulstrode's, a fact which seemed to justify her suspicions of evangelical laymen.

She one day communicated this piece of knowledge to Mrs. Farebrother, who did not fail to tell her son of it, observing, "I should not be surprised at anything in Bulstrode, but I should be sorry to think it of Mr. Lydgate."

"Why, Mother," said Mr. Farebrother after an explosive laugh, "you know very well that Lydgate is of a good family in the North. He never heard of Bulstrode before he came here."

"That is satisfactory so far as Mr. Lydgate is concerned, Camden," said the old lady with an air of precision. "But as to Bulstrode—the report may be true of some other son."

CHAPTER 27

Let the high Muse chant loves Olympian:
We are but mortals, and must sing of man.

An eminent philosopher among my friends who can dignify even your ugly furniture by lifting it into the serene light of science, has shown me this pregnant little fact. Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo, the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle that produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent—of Miss Vincy, for example. Rosamond had a Providence of her own who had kindly made her more charming than other girls and who seemed to have arranged Fred's illness and fed Mr. Wrench's mistake in order to bring her and Lydgate within effective proximity. It would have been to contravene these arrangements if Rosamond had consented to go away to Stone Court or elsewhere, as her parents wished her to do, especially since Mr. Lydgate thought the precaution needless. Therefore, while Miss Morgan and the children were sent away to a farm-house the morning after Fred's illness had declared itself, Rosamond refused to leave papa and mamma.

Poor mamma indeed was an object to touch any creature born of woman; and Mr. Vincy, who doted on his wife, was more alarmed on her account than on Fred's. But for his insistence she would have taken no rest: her brightness was all bedimmed; unconscious of her costume, which had always been so fresh and gay, she was like a sick bird with languid eye and plumage ruffled, her senses dulled to the sights and sounds that used most to interest her. Fred's delirium, in which he seemed to be wandering out of her reach, tore her heart. After her first outburst against Mr. Wrench she went about very quietly; her one low cry was to Lydgate. She would follow him out of the room and put her hand on his arm, moaning out "Save my boy." Once she pleaded, "He has always been good to me, Mr. Lydgate, he never had a hard word for his mother," as if poor Fred's suffering were an accusation against him. All the deepest fibres of the mother's memory were stirred, and the young man whose voice took a gentler tone when he spoke to her was one with the babe whom she had loved, with a love new to her, before he was born.

"I have good hope, Mrs. Vincy," Lydgate would say. "Come down with me and let us talk about the food." In that way he led her to the parlour, where Rosamond was, and made a change for her, surprising her into taking some tea or broth which had been prepared for her. There was a constant understanding between him and Rosamond on these matters. He almost always saw her before going to the sick-room, and she appealed to him as to what she could do for mamma. Her presence of mind and adroitness in carrying out his hints were admirable, and it is not wonderful that the idea of seeing Rosamond began to mingle itself with his interest in the case. Especially when the critical stage was passed and he began to feel confident of Fred's recovery. In the more doubtful time, he had advised calling in Dr. Sprague (who, if he could, would rather have remained neutral on Wrench's account), but after two consultations, the conduct of the case was left to Lydgate, and there was every reason to make him assiduous. Morning and evening he was at Mr. Vincy's and gradually the visits became cheerful as Fred became simply feeble, and lay not only in need of the utmost petting but conscious of it, so that Mrs. Vincy felt as if after all the illness had made a festival for her tenderness.

Both father and mother held it an added reason for good spirits when old Mr. Featherstone sent messages by Lydgate, saying that Fred must make haste and get well, as he, Peter Featherstone, could not do without him and missed his visits sadly. The old man himself was getting bedridden. Mrs. Vincy told these messages to Fred when he could listen, and he turned towards her his delicate, pinched face, from which all the thick blond hair had been cut away and in which the eyes seemed to have got larger, yearning for some word about Mary—wondering what she felt about his illness. No word passed his lips; but "to hear with eyes belongs to love's rare wit," and the mother in the fulness of her heart not only divined Fred's longing but felt ready for any sacrifice in order to satisfy him.

"If I can only see my boy strong again," she said in her loving folly; "and who knows? Perhaps master of Stone Court! And he can marry anybody he likes then."

"Not if they won't have me, Mother," said Fred. The illness had made him childish, and tears came as he spoke.

"Oh, take a bit of jelly, my dear," said Mrs. Vincy, secretly incredulous of any such refusal.

She never left Fred's side when her husband was not in the house, and thus Rosamond was in the unusual position of being much alone. Lydgate, naturally, never thought of staying long with her, yet it seemed that the brief, impersonal conversations they had together were creating that peculiar intimacy which consists in shyness. They were obliged to look at each other in speaking, and somehow the looking could not be carried through as the matter of course which it really was. Lydgate began to feel this sort of consciousness unpleasant, and one day looked down, or anywhere, like an ill-worked puppet. But this turned out badly: the next day Rosamond looked down, and the consequence was that when their eyes met again, both were more conscious than before. There was no help for this in science, and as Lydgate did not want to flirt, there seemed to be no help for it in folly. It was therefore a relief when neighbours no longer considered the house in

quarantine and when the chances of seeing Rosamond alone were very much reduced.

But that intimacy of mutual embarrassment, in which each feels that the other is feeling something, having once existed, its effect is not to be done away with. Talk about the weather and other well-bred topics is apt to seem a hollow device, and behaviour can hardly become easy unless it frankly recognizes a mutual fascination, which of course need not mean anything deep or serious. This was the way in which Rosamond and Lydgate slid gracefully into ease and made their intercourse lively again. Visitors came and went as usual, there was once more music in the drawing-room, and all the extra hospitality of Mr. Vincy's mayoralty returned. Lydgate, whenever he could, took his seat by Rosamond's side and lingered to hear her music, calling himself her captive—meaning, all the while, not to be her captive. The preposterousness of the notion that he could at once set up a satisfactory establishment as a married man was a sufficient guarantee against danger. This play at being a little in love was agreeable and did not interfere with graver pursuits. Flirtation, after all, was not necessarily a singeing process. Rosamond, for her part, had never enjoyed the days so much in her life before: she was sure of being admired by someone worth captivating, and she did not distinguish flirtation from love, either in herself or in another. She seemed to be sailing with a fair wind just whither she would go, and her thoughts were much occupied with a handsome house in Lowick Gate which she hoped would by and by be vacant. She was quite determined, when she was married, to rid herself adroitly of all the visitors who were not agreeable to her at her father's; and she imagined the drawing-room in her favourite home with various styles of furniture.

Certainly her thoughts were much occupied with Lydgate himself; he seemed to her almost perfect: if he had known his notes so that his enchantment under her music had been less like an emotional elephant's, and if he had been able to discriminate better the refinements of her taste in dress, she could hardly have mentioned a deficiency in him. How different he was from young Plymdale or Mr. Caius Larcher! Those young men had not a notion of French and could speak on no subject with striking knowledge, except perhaps the dyeing and carrying trades, which of course they were ashamed to mention; they were Middlemarch gentry, elated with their silver-headed whips and satin stocks, but embarrassed in their manners, and timidly jocose; even Fred was above them, having at least the accent and manner of a university man. Whereas Lydgate was always listened to, bore himself with the careless politeness of conscious superiority, and seemed to have the right clothes on by a certain natural affinity, without ever having to think about them. Rosamond was proud when he entered the room, and when he approached her with a distinguishing smile, she had a delicious sense that she was the object of enviable homage. If Lydgate had been aware of all the pride he excited in that delicate bosom, he might have been just as well pleased as any other man, even the most densely ignorant of humoral pathology or fibrous tissue; he held it one of the prettiest attitudes of the feminine mind to adore a man's pre-eminence without too precise a knowledge of what it consisted in.

But Rosamond was not one of those helpless girls who betray themselves unawares and whose behaviour is awkwardly driven by their impulses instead of being steered by wary grace and propriety. Do you imagine that her rapid forecast and rumination concerning house-furniture and society were ever discernible in her conversation, even with her mamma? On the contrary, she would have expressed the prettiest surprise and disapprobation if she had heard that another young lady had been detected in that immodest prematureness—indeed, would probably have disbelieved in its possibility. For Rosamond never showed any unbecoming knowledge and was always that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, private album for extracted verse, and perfect blond loveliness which made the irresistible woman for the doomed man of that date. Think no unfair evil of her, pray: she had no wicked plots, nothing sordid or mercenary; in fact, she never thought of money except as something necessary which other people would always provide. She was not in the habit of devising falsehoods, and if her statements were no direct clue to fact, why, they were not intended in that light—they were among her elegant accomplishments, intended to please. Nature had inspired many arts in finishing Mrs. Lemon's favourite pupil, who by general consent (Fred's excepted) was a rare compound of beauty, cleverness, and amiability.

Lydgate found it more and more agreeable to be with her; and there was no constraint now, there was a delightful interchange of influence in their eyes, and what they said had that superfluity of meaning for them which is observable with some sense of flatness by a third person; still they had no interviews or asides from which a third person need have been excluded. In fact, they flirted; and Lydgate was secure in the belief that they did nothing else. If a man could not love and be wise, surely he could flirt and be wise at the same time? Really, the men in Middlemarch, except Mr. Farebrother, were great bores, and Lydgate did not care about commercial politics or cards: what was he to do for relaxation? He was often invited to the Bulstrodes'; but the girls there were hardly out of the schoolroom, and Mrs. Bulstrode's naïve way of conciliating piety and worldliness, the nothingness of this life and the desirability of cut glass, the consciousness at once of filthy rags and the best damask, was not a sufficient relief from the weight of her husband's invariable seriousness. The Vincys' house, with all its faults, was the pleasanter by contrast; besides, it nourished Rosamond—sweet to look at as a half-opened blush-rose and adorned with accomplishments for the refined amusement of man.

But he made some enemies, other than medical, by his success with Miss Vincy. One evening he came into the drawing-room rather late, when several other visitors were there. The card-table had drawn off the elders, and Mr. Ned Plymdale (one of the good matches in Middlemarch, though not one of its leading minds) was in *tête-à-tête* with Rosamond. He had brought the last *Keepsake,* the gorgeous watered-silk publication which marked modern progress at that time; and he considered himself very fortunate that he could be the first to look over it with her, dwelling on the ladies and gentlemen with shiny copper-plate cheeks and copper-plate smiles and pointing to comic verses as capital and sentimental stories as interesting. Rosamond was gracious, and Mr. Ned was satisfied that he had the very best thing in art and literature as a medium, for "paying addresses"—the very thing to please a nice girl. He had also reasons, deep rather than ostensible, for being satisfied with his own appearance. To superficial observers his chin had too vanishing an aspect, looking as if it were being gradually reabsorbed. And it did indeed cause him some difficulty about the fit of his satin stocks, for which chins were at that time useful.

"I think the Honourable Mrs. S. is something like you," said Mr. Ned. He kept the book open at the bewitching portrait and looked at it rather languishingly.

“Her back is very large; she seems to have sat for that,” said Rosamond, not meaning any satire, but thinking how red young Plymdale’s hands were and wondering why Lydgate did not come. She went on with her tatting all the while.

“I did not say she was as beautiful as you are,” said Mr. Ned, venturing to look from the portrait to its rival.

“I suspect you of being an adroit flatterer,” said Rosamond, feeling sure that she should have to reject this young gentleman a second time.

But now Lydgate came in; the book was closed before he reached Rosamond’s corner, and as he took his seat with easy confidence on the other side of her, young Plymdale’s jaw fell like a barometer towards the cheerless side of change. Rosamond enjoyed not only Lydgate’s presence but its effect: she liked to excite jealousy.

“What a late comer you are!” she said as they shook hands. “Mamma had given you up a little while ago. How do you find Fred?”

“As usual; going on well, but slowly. I want him to go away—to Stone Court, for example. But your mamma seems to have some objection.”

“Poor fellow!” said Rosamond prettily. “You will see Fred so changed,” she added, turning to the other suitor; “we have looked to Mr. Lydgate as our guardian angel during this illness.”

Mr. Ned smiled nervously, while Lydgate, drawing the *Keepsake* towards him and opening it, gave a short, scornful laugh and tossed up his chin as if in wonderment at human folly.

“What are you laughing at so profanely?” said Rosamond with bland neutrality.

“I wonder which would turn out to be the silliest—the engravings or the writing here,” said Lydgate in his most convinced tone, while he turned over the pages quickly, seeming to see all through the book in no time and showing his large white hands to much advantage, as Rosamond thought. “Do look at this bridegroom coming out of church: did you ever see such a ‘sugared invention,’ as the Elizabethans used to say? Did any haberdasher ever look so smirking? Yet I will answer for it the story makes him one of the first gentlemen in the land.”

“You are so severe, I am frightened of you,” said Rosamond, keeping her amusement duly moderate. Poor young Plymdale had lingered with admiration over this very engraving, and his spirit was stirred.

“There are a great many celebrated people writing in the *Keepsake*, at all events,” he said in a tone at once piqued and timid. “This is the first time I have heard it called silly.”

“I think I shall turn round on you and accuse you of being a Goth,” said Rosamond, looking at Lydgate with a smile. “I suspect you know nothing about Lady Blessington and L. E. L.” Rosamond herself was not without relish for these writers, but she did not readily commit herself by admiration and was alive to the slightest hint that anything was not, according to Lydgate, in the very highest taste.

“But Sir Walter Scott—I suppose Mr. Lydgate knows him,” said young Plymdale, a little cheered by his advantage.

“Oh, I read no literature now,” said Lydgate, shutting the book and pushing it away. “I read so much when I was a lad that I suppose it will last me all my life. I used to know Scott’s poems by heart.”

“I should like to know when you left off,” said Rosamond, “because then I might be sure that I knew something which you did not know.”

“Mr. Lydgate would say that was not worth knowing,” said Mr. Ned, purposely caustic.

“On the contrary,” said Lydgate, showing no smart, but smiling with exasperating confidence at Rosamond. “It would be worth knowing by the fact that Miss Vincy could tell it me.”

Young Plymdale soon went to look at the whist-playing, thinking that Lydgate was one of the most conceited, unpleasant fellows it had ever been his ill fortune to meet.

“How rash you are!” said Rosamond, inwardly delighted. “Do you see that you have given offence?”

“What—is it Mr. Plymdale’s book? I am sorry. I didn’t think about it.”

“I shall begin to admit what you said of yourself when you first came here—that you are a bear and want teaching by the birds.”

“Well, there is a bird who can teach me what she will. Don’t I listen to her willingly?”

To Rosamond it seemed as if she and Lydgate were as good as engaged. That they were some time to be engaged had long been an idea in her mind; and ideas, we know, tend to a more solid kind of existence, the necessary materials being at hand. It is true, Lydgate had the counter-idea of remaining unengaged, but this was a mere negative, a shadow cast by other resolves which themselves were capable of shrinking. Circumstance was almost sure to be on the side of Rosamond’s idea, which had a shaping activity and looked through watchful blue eyes, whereas Lydgate’s lay blind and unconcerned as a jelly-fish which gets melted without knowing it.

That evening when he went home, he looked at his phials to see how a process of maceration was going on, with undisturbed interest; and he wrote out his daily notes with as much precision as usual. The reveries from which it was difficult for him to detach himself were ideal constructions of something else than Rosamond’s virtues, and the primitive tissue was still his fair unknown. Moreover, he was beginning to feel some zest for the growing though half-suppressed feud between him and the other medical men, which was likely to become more manifest now that Bulstrode’s method of managing the new hospital was about to be declared; and there were various inspiriting signs that his non-acceptance by some of Peacock’s patients might be counterbalanced by the impression he had produced in other quarters. Only a few days later, when he had happened to overtake Rosamond on the Lowick road and had got down from his horse to walk by her side until he had quite protected her from a passing drove, he had been stopped by a servant on horseback with a message calling him to a house of some importance where Peacock had never attended; and it was the second instance of this kind. The servant was Sir James Chettam’s, and the house was Lowick Manor.

CHAPTER 28

1ST GENT. All times are good to seek your wedded home
Bringing a mutual delight.
2ND GENT. Why, true.
The calendar hath not an evil day
For souls made one by love, and even death
Were sweetness, if it came like rolling waves
While they two clasped each other, and foresaw
No life apart.

Mr. and Mrs. Casaubon, returning from their wedding journey, arrived at Lowick Manor in the middle of January. A light snow was falling as they descended at the door, and in the morning, when Dorothea passed from her dressing-room into the blue-green boudoir that we know of, she saw the long avenue of limes lifting their trunks from a white earth and spreading white branches against the dun and motionless sky. The distant flat shrank in uniform whiteness and low-hanging uniformity of cloud. The very furniture in the room seemed to have shrunk since she saw it before: the stag in the tapestry looked more like a ghost in his ghostly blue-green world; the volumes of polite literature in the bookcase looked more like immovable imitations of books. The bright fire of dry oak-boughs burning on the dogs seemed an incongruous renewal of life and glow—like the figure of Dorothea herself as she entered carrying the red-leather cases containing the cameos for Celia.

She was glowing from her morning toilette as only healthful youth can glow: there was gemlike brightness on her coiled hair and in her hazel eyes; there was warm red life in her lips; her throat had a breathing whiteness above the differing white of the fur which itself seemed to wind about her neck and cling down her blue-grey pelisse with a tenderness gathered from her own, a sentient commingled innocence which kept its loveliness against the crystalline purity of the outdoor snow. As she laid the cameo-cases on the table in the bow-window, she unconsciously kept her hands on them, immediately absorbed in looking out on the still, white enclosure which made her visible world.

Mr. Casaubon, who had risen early complaining of palpitation, was in the library giving audience to his curate, Mr. Tucker. By and by Celia would come in her quality of bridesmaid as well as sister, and through the next weeks there would be wedding visits received and given, all in continuance of that transitional life understood to correspond with the excitement of bridal felicity and keeping up the sense of busy ineffectiveness, as of a dream which the dreamer begins to suspect. The duties of her married life, contemplated as so great beforehand, seemed to be shrinking with the furniture and the white vapour-walled landscape. The clear heights where she expected to walk in full communion had become difficult to see even in her imagination; the delicious repose of the soul on a complete superior had been shaken into uneasy effort and alarmed with dim presentiment. When would the days begin of that active wifely devotion which was to strengthen her husband's life and exalt her own? Never perhaps, as she had preconceived them; but somehow—still somehow. In this solemnly pledged union of her life, duty would present itself in some new form of inspiration and give a new meaning to wifely love.

Meanwhile there was the snow and the low arch of dun vapour—there was the stifling oppression of that gentlewoman's world, where everything was done for her and none asked for her aid—where the sense of connexion with a manifold pregnant existence had to be kept up painfully as an inward vision instead of coming from without in claims that would have shaped her energies. "What shall I do?" "Whatever you please, my dear." That had been her brief history since she had left off learning morning lessons and practising silly rhythms on the hated piano. Marriage, which was to bring guidance into worthy and imperative occupation, had not yet freed her from the gentlewoman's oppressive liberty; it had not even filled her leisure with the ruminant joy of unchecked tenderness. Her blooming, full-pulsed youth stood there in a moral imprisonment which made itself one with the chill, colourless, narrowed landscape, with the shrunken furniture, the never-read books, and the ghostly stag in a pale, fantastic world that seemed to be vanishing from the daylight.

In the first minutes when Dorothea looked out she felt nothing but the dreary oppression; then came a keen remembrance, and turning away from the window, she walked round the room. The ideas and hopes which were living in her mind when she first saw this room three months before were present now only as memories; she judged them as we judge transient and departed things. All existence seemed to beat with a lower pulse than her own, and her religious faith was a solitary cry, the struggle out of a nightmare in which every object was withering and shrinking away from her. Each remembered thing in the room was disenchanted, was deadened as an unlit transparency, till her wandering gaze came to the group of miniatures, and there at last she saw something which had gathered new breath and meaning: it was the miniature of Mr. Casaubon's aunt Julia, who had made the unfortunate marriage, of Will Ladislaw's grandmother. Dorothea could fancy that it was alive now—the delicate woman's face which yet had a headstrong look, a peculiarity difficult to interpret. Was it only her friends who thought her marriage unfortunate? Or did she herself find it out to be a mistake, and taste the salt bitterness of her tears in the merciful silence of the night? What breadths of experience Dorothea seemed to have passed over since she first looked at this miniature! She felt a new companionship with it, as if it had an ear for her and could see how she was looking at it. Here was a woman who had known some difficulty about marriage. Nay, the

colours deepened, the lips and chin seemed to get larger, the hair and eyes seemed to be sending out light, the face was masculine and beamed on her with that full gaze which tells her on whom it falls that she is too interesting for the slightest movement of her eyelid to pass unnoticed and uninterpreted. The vivid presentation came like a pleasant glow to Dorothea; she felt herself smiling, and turning from the miniature, sat down and looked up as if she were again talking to a figure in front of her. But the smile disappeared as she went on meditating, and at last she said aloud, “Oh, it was cruel to speak so! How sad—how dreadful!”

She rose quickly and went out of the room, hurrying along the corridor with the irresistible impulse to go and see her husband and inquire if she could do anything for him. Perhaps Mr. Tucker was gone and Mr. Casaubon was alone in the library. She felt as if all her morning’s gloom would vanish if she could see her husband glad because of her presence.

But when she reached the head of the dark oak staircase, there was Celia coming up, and below there was Mr. Brooke, exchanging welcomes and congratulations with Mr. Casaubon.

“Dodo!” said Celia in her quiet staccato, then kissed her sister, whose arms encircled her, and said no more. I think they both cried a little in a furtive manner, while Dorothea ran downstairs to greet her uncle.

“I need not ask how you are, my dear,” said Mr. Brooke after kissing her forehead. “Rome has agreed with you, I see—happiness, frescoes, the antique—that sort of thing. Well, it’s very pleasant to have you back again, and you understand all about art now, eh? But Casaubon is a little pale, I tell him—a little pale, you know. Studying hard in his holidays is carrying it rather too far. I overdid it at one time”—Mr. Brooke still held Dorothea’s hand, but had turned his face to Mr. Casaubon—“about topography, ruins, temples—I thought I had a clue, but I saw it would carry me too far, and nothing might have come of it. You may go any length in that sort of thing, and nothing may come of it, you know.”

Dorothea’s eyes also were turned up to her husband’s face with some anxiety at the idea that those who saw him afresh after absence might be aware of signs which she had not noticed.

“Nothing to alarm you, my dear,” said Mr. Brooke, observing her expression. “A little English beef and mutton will soon make a difference. It was all very well to look pale, sitting for the portrait of Aquinas, you know—we got your letter just in time. But Aquinas, now—he was a little too subtle, wasn’t he? Does anybody read Aquinas?”

“He is not indeed an author adapted to superficial minds,” said Mr. Casaubon, meeting these timely questions with dignified patience.

“You would like coffee in your own room, Uncle?” said Dorothea, coming to the rescue.

“Yes; and you must go to Celia; she has great news to tell you, you know. I leave it all to her.”

The blue-green boudoir looked much more cheerful when Celia was seated there in a pelisse exactly like her sister’s, surveying the cameos with a placid satisfaction, while the conversation passed on to other topics.

“Do you think it nice to go to Rome on a wedding journey?” said Celia with her ready, delicate blush which Dorothea was used to on the smallest occasions.

“It would not suit all—not you, dear, for example,” said Dorothea quietly. No one would ever know what she thought of a wedding journey to Rome.

“Mrs. Cadwallader says it is nonsense, people going a long journey when they are married. She says they get tired to death of each other and can’t quarrel comfortably, as they would at home. And Lady Chettam says she went to Bath.” Celia’s colour changed again and again—seemed

> To come and go with tidings from the heart,
> As it a running messenger had been.

It must mean more than Celia’s blushing usually did.

“Celia! Has something happened?” said Dorothea in a tone full of sisterly feeling. “Have you really any great news to tell me?”

“It was because you went away, Dodo. Then there was nobody but me for Sir James to talk to,” said Celia with a certain roguishness in her eyes.

“I understand. It is as I used to hope and believe,” said Dorothea, taking her sister’s face between her hands and looking at her half anxiously. Celia’s marriage seemed more serious than it used to do.

“It was only three days ago,” said Celia. “And Lady Chettam is very kind.”

“And you are very happy?”

“Yes. We are not going to be married yet. Because everything is to be got ready. And I don’t want to be married so very soon because I think it is nice to be engaged. And we shall be married all our lives after.”

“I do believe you could not marry better, Kitty. Sir James is a good, honourable man,” said Dorothea warmly.

“He has gone on with the cottages, Dodo. He will tell you about them when he comes. Shall you be glad to see him?”

“Of course I shall. How can you ask me?”

“Only I was afraid you would be getting so learned,” said Celia, regarding Mr. Casaubon’s learning as a kind of damp which might in due time saturate a neighbouring body.

CHAPTER 29

I found that no genius in another could please me.
My unfortunate paradoxes had entirely dried up that source of comfort.
—GOLDSMITH

One morning, some weeks after her arrival at Lowick, Dorothea—but why always Dorothea? Was her point of view the only possible one with regard to this marriage? I protest against all our interest, all our effort at understanding being given to the young skins that look blooming in spite of trouble; for these too will get faded and will know the older and more eating griefs which we are helping to neglect. In spite of the blinking eyes and white moles objectionable to Celia and the want of muscular curve which was morally painful to Sir James, Mr. Casaubon had an intense consciousness within him and was spiritually a-hungered like the rest of us. He had done nothing exceptional in marrying—nothing but what society sanctions and considers an occasion for wreaths and bouquets. It had occurred to him that he must not any longer defer his intention of matrimony, and he had reflected that in taking a wife a man of good position should expect and carefully choose a blooming young lady—the younger the better, because more educable and submissive—of a rank equal to his own, of religious principles, virtuous disposition, and good understanding. On such a young lady he would make handsome settlements, and he would neglect no arrangement for her happiness; in return, he should receive family pleasures and leave behind him that copy of himself which seemed so urgently required of a man—to the sonneteers of the sixteenth century. Times had altered since then, and no sonneteer had insisted on Mr. Casaubon's leaving a copy of himself; moreover, he had not yet succeeded in issuing copies of his mythological key, but he had always intended to acquit himself by marriage, and the sense that he was fast leaving the years behind him, that the world was getting dimmer, and that he felt lonely was a reason to him for losing no more time in overtaking domestic delights before they too were left behind by the years.

And when he had seen Dorothea he believed that he had found even more than he demanded: she might really be such a helpmate to him as would enable him to dispense with a hired secretary, an aid which Mr. Casaubon had never yet employed and had a suspicious dread of. (Mr. Casaubon was nervously conscious that he was expected to manifest a powerful mind.) Providence, in its kindness, had supplied him with the wife he needed. A wife, a modest young lady with the purely appreciative, unambitious abilities of her sex, is sure to think her husband's mind powerful. Whether Providence had taken equal care of Miss Brooke in presenting her with Mr. Casaubon was an idea which could hardly occur to him. Society never made the preposterous demand that a man should think as much about his own qualifications for making a charming girl happy as he thinks of hers for making himself happy. As if a man could choose not only his wife but his wife's husband! Or as if he were bound to provide charms for his posterity in his own person! When Dorothea accepted him with effusion, that was only natural; and Mr. Casaubon believed that his happiness was going to begin.

He had not had much foretaste of happiness in his previous life. To know intense joy without a strong bodily frame, one must have an enthusiastic soul. Mr. Casaubon had never had a strong bodily frame, and his soul was sensitive without being enthusiastic: it was too languid to thrill out of self-consciousness into passionate delight; it went on fluttering in the swampy ground where it was hatched, thinking of its wings and never flying. His experience was of that pitiable kind which shrinks from pity and fears most of all that it should be known; it was that proud narrow sensitiveness which has not mass enough to spare for transformation into sympathy and quivers threadlike in small currents of self-preoccupation or at best of an egoistic scrupulosity. And Mr. Casaubon had many scruples: he was capable of a severe self-restraint; he was resolute in being a man of honour according to the code; he would be unimpeachable by any recognized opinion. In conduct these ends had been attained; but the difficulty of making his *Key to All Mythologies* unimpeachable weighed like lead upon his mind, and the pamphlets—or *parerga* as he called them—by which he tested his public and deposited small monumental records of his march were far from having been seen in all their significance. He suspected the archdeacon of not having read them; he was in painful doubt as to what was really thought of them by the leading minds of Brasenose and bitterly convinced that his old acquaintance Carp had been the writer of that depreciatory recension which was kept locked in a small drawer of Mr. Casaubon's desk, and also in a dark closet of his verbal memory. These were heavy impressions to struggle against and brought that melancholy embitterment which is the consequence of all excessive claim; even his religious faith wavered with his wavering trust in his own authorship, and the consolations of the Christian hope in immortality seemed to lean on the immortality of the still unwritten *Key to All Mythologies*. For my part I am very sorry for him. It is an uneasy lot at best to be what we call highly taught and yet not to enjoy: to be present at this great spectacle of life and never to be liberated from a small, hungry, shivering self—never to be fully possessed by the glory we behold, never to have our consciousness rapturously transformed into the vividness of a thought, the ardour of a passion, the energy of an action, but always to be scholarly and uninspired, ambitious and timid, scrupulous and dimsighted. Becoming a dean or even a bishop would make little difference, I fear, to Mr. Casaubon's uneasiness. Doubtless some ancient Greek has observed that behind the big mask and the speaking-trumpet there must always be our poor little eyes peeping as usual and our timorous lips more or less under anxious control.

To this mental estate mapped out a quarter of a century before, to sensibilities thus fenced in, Mr. Casaubon had thought of annexing happiness with a lovely young bride; but even before marriage, as we have seen, he found himself under a new

depression in the consciousness that the new bliss was not blissful to him. Inclination yearned back, to its old, easier custom. And the deeper he went in domesticity the more did the sense of acquitting himself and acting with propriety predominate over any other satisfaction. Marriage, like religion and erudition, nay, like authorship itself, was fated to become an outward requirement, and Edward Casaubon was bent on fulfilling unimpeachably all requirements. Even drawing Dorothea into use in his study, according to his own intention before marriage, was an effort which he was always tempted to defer, and but for her pleading insistance it might never have begun. But she had succeeded in making it a matter of course that she should take her place at an early hour in the library and have work either of reading aloud or copying assigned her. The work had been easier to define because Mr. Casaubon had adopted an immediate intention: there was to be a new *parergon*, a small monograph on some lately traced indications concerning the Egyptian mysteries whereby certain assertions of Warburton's could be corrected. References were extensive even here, but not altogether shoreless, and sentences were actually to be written in the shape wherein they would be scanned by Brasenose and a less formidable posterity. These minor monumental productions were always exciting to Mr. Casaubon; digestion was made difficult by the interference of citations or by the rivalry of dialectical phrases ringing against each other in his brain. And from the first there was to be a Latin dedication about which everything was uncertain except that it was not to be addressed to Carp; it was a poisonous regret to Mr. Casaubon that he had once addressed a dedication to Carp in which he had numbered that member of the animal kingdom among the *viros nullo aevo perituros*, a mistake which would infallibly lay the dedicator open to ridicule in the next age and might even be chuckled over by Pike and Tench in the present.

Thus Mr. Casaubon was in one of his busiest epochs, and as I began to say a little while ago, Dorothea joined him early in the library, where he had breakfasted alone. Celia at this time was on a second visit to Lowick, probably the last before her marriage, and was in the drawing-room expecting Sir James.

Dorothea had learned to read the signs of her husband's mood, and she saw that the morning had become more foggy there during the last hour. She was going silently to her desk when he said in that distant tone which implied that he was discharging a disagreeable duty, "Dorothea, here is a letter for you, which was enclosed in one addressed to me."

It was a letter of two pages, and she immediately looked at the signature.

"Mr. Ladislaw? What can he have to say to me?" she exclaimed in a tone of pleased surprise. "But," she added, looking at Mr. Casaubon, "I can imagine what he has written to you about."

"You can, if you please, read the letter," said Mr. Casaubon, severely pointing to it with his pen and not looking at her. "But I may as well say beforehand that I must decline the proposal it contains to pay a visit here. I trust I may be excused from desiring an interval of complete freedom from such distractions as have been hitherto inevitable, and especially from guests whose desultory vivacity makes their presence a fatigue."

There had been no clashing of temper between Dorothea and her husband since that little explosion in Rome, which had left such strong traces in her mind that it had been easier ever since to quell emotion than to incur the consequence of venting it. But this ill-tempered anticipation that she could desire visits which might be disagreeable to her husband, this gratuitous defence of himself against selfish complaint on her part, was too sharp a sting to be meditated on until after it had been resented. Dorothea had thought that she could have been patient with John Milton, but she had never imagined him behaving in this way; and for a moment Mr. Casaubon seemed to be stupidly undiscerning and odiously unjust. Pity, that "newborn babe" which was by and by to rule many a storm within her, did not "stride the blast" on this occasion. With her first words, uttered in a tone that shook him, she startled Mr. Casaubon into looking at her and meeting the flash of her eyes.

"Why do you attribute to me a wish for anything that would annoy you? You speak to me as if I were something you had to contend against. Wait at least till I appear to consult my own pleasure apart from yours."

"Dorothea, you are hasty," answered Mr. Casaubon nervously.

Decidedly, this woman was too young to be on the formidable level of wifehood—unless she had been pale and featureless and taken everything for granted.

"I think it was you who were first hasty in your false suppositions about my feeling," said Dorothea in the same tone. The fire was not dissipated yet, and she thought it was ignoble in her husband not to apologize to her.

"We will, if you please, say no more on this subject, Dorothea. I have neither leisure nor energy for this kind of debate."

Here Mr. Casaubon dipped his pen and made as if he would return to his writing, though his hand trembled so much that the words seemed to be written in an unknown character. There are answers which, in turning away wrath, only send it to the other end of the room, and to have a discussion coolly waived when you feel that justice is all on your side is even more exasperating in marriage than in philosophy.

Dorothea left Ladislaw's two letters unread on her husband's writing-table and went to her own place, the scorn and indignation within her rejecting the reading of these letters, just as we hurl away any trash towards which we seem to have been suspected of mean cupidity. She did not in the least divine the subtle sources of her husband's bad temper about these letters: she only knew that they had caused him to offend her. She began to work at once, and her hand did not tremble; on the contrary, in writing out the quotations which had been given to her the day before, she felt that she was forming her letters beautifully, and it seemed to her that she saw the construction of the Latin she was copying, and which she was beginning to understand, more clearly than usual. In her indignation there was a sense of superiority, but it went out for the present in firmness of stroke and did not compress itself into an inward articulate voice pronouncing the once "affable archangel" a poor creature.

There had been this apparent quiet for half an hour, and Dorothea had not looked away from her own table when she heard the loud bang of a book on the floor and turning quickly saw Mr. Casaubon on the library-steps clinging forward as if he were in some bodily distress. She started up and bounded towards him in an instant; he was evidently in great straits for breath. Jumping on a stool, she got close to his elbow and said with her whole soul melted into tender alarm, "Can you lean on me, dear?"

He was still for two or three minutes, which seemed endless to her, unable to speak or move, gasping for breath. When at last he descended the three steps and fell backward in the large chair which Dorothea had drawn close to the foot of the

ladder, he no longer gasped but seemed helpless and about to faint. Dorothea rang the bell violently, and presently Mr. Casaubon was helped to the couch; he did not faint and was gradually reviving when Sir James Chettam came in, having been met in the hall with the news that Mr. Casaubon had "had a fit in the library."

"Good God! This is just what might have been expected," was his immediate thought. If his prophetic soul had been urged to particularize, it seemed to him that "fits" would have been the definite expression alighted upon. He asked his informant, the butler, whether the doctor had been sent for. The butler never knew his master want the doctor before, but would it not be right to send for a physician?

When Sir James entered the library, however, Mr. Casaubon could make some signs of his usual politeness, and Dorothea, who in the reaction from her first terror had been kneeling and sobbing by his side, now rose and herself proposed that someone should ride off for a medical man.

"I recommend you to send for Lydgate," said Sir James. "My mother has called him in, and she has found him uncommonly clever. She has had a poor opinion of the physicians since my father's death."

Dorothea appealed to her husband, and he made a silent sign of approval. So Mr. Lydgate was sent for and he came wonderfully soon, for the messenger, who was Sir James Chettam's man and knew Mr. Lydgate, met him leading his horse along the Lowick road and giving his arm to Miss Vincy.

Celia, in the drawing-room, had known nothing of the trouble till Sir James told her of it. After Dorothea's account he no longer considered the illness a fit, but still something "of that nature."

"Poor dear Dodo—how dreadful!" said Celia, feeling as much grieved as her own perfect happiness would allow. Her little hands were clasped and enclosed by Sir James's as a bud is enfolded by a liberal calyx. "It is very shocking that Mr. Casaubon should be ill; but I never did like him. And I think he is not half fond enough of Dorothea; and he ought to be, for I am sure no one else would have had him—do you think they would?"

"I always thought it a horrible sacrifice of your sister," said Sir James.

"Yes. But poor Dodo never did do what other people do, and I think she never will."

"She is a noble creature," said the loyal-hearted Sir James. He had just had a fresh impression of this kind, as he had seen Dorothea stretching her tender arm under her husband's neck and looking at him with unspeakable sorrow. He did not know how much penitence there was in the sorrow.

"Yes," said Celia, thinking it was very well for Sir James to say so, but *he* would not have been comfortable with Dodo. "Shall I go to her? Could I help her, do you think?"

"I think it would be well for you just to go and see her before Lydgate comes," said Sir James magnanimously. "Only don't stay long."

While Celia was gone, he walked up and down remembering what he had originally felt about Dorothea's engagement and feeling a revival of his disgust at Mr. Brooke's indifference. If Cadwallader—if everyone else had regarded the affair as he, Sir James, had done, the marriage might have been hindered. It was wicked to let a young girl blindly decide her fate in that way, without any effort to save her. Sir James had long ceased to have any regrets on his own account; his heart was satisfied with his engagement to Celia. But he had a chivalrous nature (was not the disinterested service of woman among the ideal glories of the old chivalry?); his disregarded love had not turned to bitterness; its death had made sweet odours—floating memories that clung with a consecrating effect to Dorothea. He could remain her brotherly friend, interpreting her actions with generous trustfulness.

CHAPTER 30

Qui veut délasser hors de propos, lasse.

—PASCAL

Mr. Casaubon had no second attack of equal severity with the first and in a few days began to recover his usual condition. But Lydgate seemed to think the case worth a great deal of attention. He not only used his stethoscope (which had not become a matter of course in practice at that time), but sat quietly by his patient and watched him. To Mr. Casaubon's questions about himself, he replied that the source of the illness was the common error of intellectual men—a too eager and monotonous application: the remedy was to be satisfied with moderate work and to seek variety of relaxation. Mr. Brooke, who sat by on one occasion, suggested that Mr. Casaubon should go fishing, as Cadwallader did, and have a turning-room, make toys, table-legs, and that kind of thing.

"In short, you recommend me to anticipate the arrival of my second childhood," said poor Mr. Casaubon with some bitterness. "These things," he added, looking at Lydgate, "would be to me such relaxation as tow-picking is to prisoners in a house of correction."

"I confess," said Lydgate, smiling, "amusement is rather an unsatisfactory prescription. It is something like telling people to keep up their spirits. Perhaps I had better say that you must submit to be mildly bored rather than to go on working."

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Brooke. "Get Dorothea to play backgammon with you in the evenings. And shuttlecock, now—I don't know a finer game than shuttlecock for the daytime. I remember it all the fashion. To be sure, your eyes might not stand that, Casaubon. But you must unbend, you know. Why, you might take to some light study: conchology, now; I always think that must be a light study. Or get Dorothea to read you light things, Smollett—*Roderick Random, Humphrey Clinker*; they are a little broad, but she may read anything now she's married, you know. I remember they made me laugh uncommonly—there's a droll bit about a postilion's breeches. We have no such humour now. I have gone through all these things, but they might be rather new to you."

"As new as eating thistles," would have been an answer to represent Mr. Casaubon's feelings. But he only bowed resignedly, with due respect to his wife's uncle, and observed that doubtless the works he mentioned had "served as a resource to a certain order of minds."

"You see," said the able magistrate to Lydgate when they were outside the door, "Casaubon has been a little narrow; it leaves him rather at a loss when you forbid him his particular work, which I believe is something very deep indeed—in the line of research, you know. I would never give way to that; I was always versatile. But a clergyman is tied a little tight. If they would make him a bishop, now! He did a very good pamphlet for Peel. He would have more movement then, more show; he might get a little flesh. But I recommend you to talk to Mrs. Casaubon. She is clever enough for anything, is my niece. Tell her, her husband wants liveliness, diversion: put her on amusing tactics."

Without Mr. Brooke's advice, Lydgate had determined on speaking to Dorothea. She had not been present while her uncle was throwing out his pleasant suggestions as to the mode in which life at Lowick might be enlivened, but she was usually by her husband's side, and the unaffected signs of intense anxiety in her face and voice about whatever touched his mind or health made a drama which Lydgate was inclined to watch. He said to himself that he was only doing right in telling her the truth about her husband's probable future, but he certainly thought also that it would be interesting to talk confidentially with her. A medical man likes to make psychological observations, and sometimes in the pursuit of such studies is too easily tempted into momentous prophecy which life and death easily set at nought. Lydgate had often been satirical on this gratuitous prediction, and he meant now to be guarded.

He asked for Mrs. Casaubon, but being told that she was out walking, he was going away when Dorothea and Celia appeared, both glowing from their struggle with the March wind. When Lydgate begged to speak with her alone, Dorothea opened the library door, which happened to be the nearest, thinking of nothing at the moment but what he might have to say about Mr. Casaubon. It was the first time she had entered this room since her husband had been taken ill, and the servant had chosen not to open the shutters. But there was light enough to read by from the narrow upper panes of the windows.

"You will not mind this sombre light," said Dorothea, standing in the middle of the room. "Since you forbade books, the library has been out of the question. But Mr. Casaubon will soon be here again, I hope. Is he not making progress?"

"Yes, much more rapid progress than I at first expected. Indeed, he is already nearly in his usual state of health."

"You do not fear that the illness will return?" said Dorothea, whose quick ear had detected some significance in Lydgate's tone.

"Such cases are peculiarly difficult to pronounce upon," said Lydgate. "The only point on which I can be confident is that it will be desirable to be very watchful on Mr. Casaubon's account lest he should in any way strain his nervous power."

"I beseech you to speak quite plainly," said Dorothea in an imploring tone. "I cannot bear to think that there might be something which I did not know and which, if I had known it, would have made me act differently." The words came out like a cry; it was evident that they were the voice of some mental experience which lay not very far off.

"Sit down," she added, placing herself on the nearest chair and throwing off her bonnet and gloves with an instinctive

discarding of formality where a great question of destiny was concerned.

"What you say now justifies my own view," said Lydgate. "I think it is one's function as a medical man to hinder regrets of that sort as far as possible. But I beg you to observe that Mr. Casaubon's case is precisely of the kind in which the issue is most difficult to pronounce upon. He may possibly live for fifteen years or more without much worse health than he has had hitherto."

Dorothea had turned very pale, and when Lydgate paused she said in a low voice, "You mean if we are very careful."

"Yes—careful against mental agitation of all kinds, and against excessive application."

"He would be miserable if he had to give up his work," said Dorothea with a quick prevision of that wretchedness.

"I am aware of that. The only course is to try by all means, direct and indirect, to moderate and vary his occupations. With a happy concurrence of circumstances, there is as I said, no immediate danger from that affection of the heart which I believe to have been the cause of his late attack. On the other hand, it is possible that the disease may develop itself more rapidly: it is one of those cases in which death is sometimes sudden. Nothing should be neglected which might be affected by such an issue."

There was silence for a few moments, while Dorothea sat as if she had been turned to marble, though the life within her was so intense that her mind had never before swept in brief time over an equal range of scenes and motives.

"Help me, pray," she said at last in the same low voice as before. "Tell me what I can do."

"What do you think of foreign travel? You have been lately in Rome, I think."

The memories which made this resource utterly hopeless were a new current that shook Dorothea out of her pallid immobility.

"Oh, that would not do—that would be worse than anything," she said with a more childlike despondency, while the tears rolled down. "Nothing will be of any use that he does not enjoy."

"I wish that I could have spared you this pain," said Lydgate, deeply touched, yet wondering about her marriage. Women just like Dorothea had not entered into his traditions.

"It was right of you to tell me. I thank you for telling me the truth."

"I wish you to understand that I shall not say anything to enlighten Mr. Casaubon himself. I think it desirable for him to know nothing more than that he must not overwork himself and must observe certain rules. Anxiety of any kind would be precisely the most unfavourable condition for him."

Lydgate rose, and Dorothea mechanically rose at the same time, unclasping her cloak and throwing it off as if it stifled her. He was bowing and quitting her when an impulse, which, if she had been alone, would have turned into a prayer, made her say with a sob in her voice, "Oh, you are a wise man, are you not? You know all about life and death. Advise me. Think what I can do. He has been labouring all his life and looking forward. He minds about nothing else. And I mind about nothing else—"

For years after, Lydgate remembered the impression produced in him by this involuntary appeal—this cry from soul to soul, without other consciousness than their moving with kindred natures in the same embroiled medium, the same troublous, fitfully illuminated life. But what could he say now except that he should see Mr. Casaubon again tomorrow?

When he was gone, Dorothea's tears gushed forth and relieved her stifling oppression. Then she dried her eyes, reminded that her distress must not be betrayed to her husband, and looked round the room thinking that she must order the servant to attend to it as usual since Mr. Casaubon might now at any moment wish to enter. On his writing-table there were letters which had lain untouched since the morning when he was taken ill, and among them, as Dorothea well remembered, there were young Ladislaw's letters, the one addressed to her still unopened. The associations of these letters had been made the more painful by that sudden attack of illness which she felt that the agitation caused by her anger might have helped to bring on; it would be time enough to read them when they were again thrust upon her, and she had had no inclination to fetch them from the library. But now it occurred to her that they should be put out of her husband's sight; whatever might have been the sources of his annoyance about them, he must, if possible, not be annoyed again; and she ran her eyes first over the letter addressed to him to assure herself whether or not it would be necessary to write in order to hinder the offensive visit.

Will wrote from Rome, and began by saying that his obligations to Mr. Casaubon were too deep for all thanks not to seem impertinent. It was plain that if he were not grateful, he must be the poorest-spirited rascal who had ever found a generous friend. To expand in wordy thanks would be like saying "I am honest." But Will had come to perceive that his defects—defects which Mr. Casaubon had himself often pointed to—needed for their correction that more strenuous position which his relative's generosity had hitherto prevented from being inevitable. He trusted that he should make the best return, if return were possible, by showing the effectiveness of the education for which he was indebted and by ceasing in future to need any diversion towards himself of funds on which others might have a better claim. He was coming to England to try his fortune, as many other young men were obliged to do whose only capital was in their brains. His friend Naumann had desired him to take charge of the *Dispute*—the picture painted for Mr. Casaubon, with whose permission, and Mrs. Casaubon's, Will would convey it to Lowick in person. A letter addressed to the Poste Restante in Paris within the fortnight would hinder him, if necessary, from arriving at an inconvenient moment. He enclosed a letter to Mrs. Casaubon in which he continued a discussion about art begun with her in Rome.

Opening her own letter, Dorothea saw that it was a lively continuation of his remonstrance with her fanatical sympathy and her want of sturdy, neutral delight in things as they were—an outpouring of his young vivacity which it was impossible to read just now. She had immediately to consider what was to be done about the other letter: there was still time perhaps to prevent Will from coming to Lowick. Dorothea ended by giving the letter to her uncle, who was still in the house, and begging him to let Will know that Mr. Casaubon had been ill and that his health would not allow the reception of any visitors.

No one more ready than Mr. Brooke to write a letter: his only difficulty was to write a short one, and his ideas in this case expanded over the three large pages and the inward foldings. He had simply said to Dorothea, "To be sure, I will write, my dear. He's a very clever young fellow—this young Ladislaw—I dare say will be a rising young man. It's a good

letter—marks his sense of things, you know. However, I will tell him about Casaubon."

But the end of Mr. Brooke's pen was a thinking organ, evolving sentences, especially of a benevolent kind, before the rest of his mind could well overtake them. It expressed regrets and proposed remedies, which, when Mr. Brooke read them, seemed felicitously worded—surprisingly the right thing—and determined a sequel which he had never before thought of. In this case, his pen found it such a pity that young Ladislaw should not have come into the neighbourhood just at that time in order that Mr. Brooke might make his acquaintance more fully and that they might go over the long-neglected Italian drawings together—it also felt such an interest in a young man who was starting in life with a stock of ideas—that by the end of the second page it had persuaded Mr. Brooke to invite young Ladislaw, since he could not be received at Lowick, to come to Tipton Grange. Why not? They could find a great many things to do together, and this was a period of peculiar growth; the political horizon was expanding, and— In short, Mr. Brooke's pen went off into a little speech which it had lately reported for that imperfectly edited organ the *Middlemarch Pioneer*. While Mr. Brooke was sealing this letter, he felt elated with an influx of dim projects: a young man capable of putting ideas into form, the *Pioneer* purchased to clear the pathway for a new candidate, documents utilized—who knew what might come of it all? Since Celia was going to marry immediately, it would be very pleasant to have a young fellow at table with him, at least for a time.

But he went away without telling Dorothea what he had put into the letter, for she was engaged with her husband, and, in fact, these things were of no importance to her.

CHAPTER 31

How will you know the pitch of that great bell
Too large for you to stir? Let but a flute
Play 'neath the fine-mixed metal: listen close
Till the right note flows forth, a silvery rill:
Then shall the huge bell tremble—then the mass
With myriad waves concurrent shall respond
In low soft unison.

Lydgate that evening spoke to Miss Vincy of Mrs. Casaubon and laid some emphasis on the strong feeling she appeared to have for that formal, studious man thirty years older than herself.

"Of course she is devoted to her husband," said Rosamond, implying a notion of necessary sequence which the scientific man regarded as the prettiest possible for a woman; but she was thinking at the same time that it was not so very melancholy to be mistress of Lowick Manor with a husband likely to die soon. "Do you think her very handsome?"

"She certainly is handsome, but I have not thought about it," said Lydgate.

"I suppose it would be unprofessional," said Rosamond, dimpling. "But now your practice is spreading! You were called in before to the Chettams, I think; and now, the Casaubons."

"Yes," said Lydgate in a tone of compulsory admission. "But I don't really like attending such people so well as the poor. The cases are more monotonous, and one has to go through more fuss and listen more deferentially to nonsense."

"Not more than in Middlemarch," said Rosamond. "And at least you go through wide corridors and have the scent of rose-leaves everywhere."

"That is true, Mademoiselle de Montmorenci," said Lydgate, just bending his head to the table and lifting with his fourth finger her delicate handkerchief which lay at the mouth of her reticule, as if to enjoy its scent, while he looked at her with a smile.

But this agreeable holiday freedom with which Lydgate hovered about the flower of Middlemarch could not continue indefinitely. It was not more possible to find social isolation in that town than elsewhere, and two people persistently flirting could by no means escape from "the various entanglements, weights, blows, clashings, motions, by which things severally go on." Whatever Miss Vincy did must be remarked, and she was perhaps the more conspicuous to admirers and critics because just now Mrs. Vincy, after some struggle, had gone with Fred to stay a little while at Stone Court, there being no other way of at once gratifying old Featherstone and keeping watch against Mary Garth, who appeared a less tolerable daughter-in-law in proportion as Fred's illness disappeared.

Aunt Bulstrode, for example, came a little oftener into Lowick Gate to see Rosamond, now she was alone. For Mrs. Bulstrode had a true sisterly feeling for her brother, always thinking that he might have married better, but wishing well to the children. Now, Mrs. Bulstrode had a long-standing intimacy with Mrs. Plymdale. They had nearly the same preferences in silks, patterns for underclothing, china-ware, and clergymen; they confided their little troubles of health and household management to each other, and various little points of superiority on Mrs. Bulstrode's side, namely, more decided seriousness, more admiration for mind, and a house outside the town, sometimes served to give colour to their conversation without dividing them: well-meaning women both, knowing very little of their own motives.

Mrs. Bulstrode, paying a morning visit to Mrs. Plymdale, happened to say that she could not stay longer because she was going to see poor Rosamond.

"Why do you say 'poor Rosamond'?" said Mrs. Plymdale, a round-eyed, sharp little woman like a tamed falcon.

"She is so pretty and has been brought up in such thoughtlessness. The mother, you know, had always that levity about her, which makes me anxious for the children."

"Well, Harriet, if I am to speak my mind," said Mrs. Plymdale with emphasis, "I must say, anybody would suppose you and Mr. Bulstrode would be delighted with what has happened, for you have done everything to put Mr. Lydgate forward."

"Selina, what do you mean?" said Mrs. Bulstrode in genuine surprise.

"Not but what I am truly thankful for Ned's sake," said Mrs. Plymdale. "He could certainly better afford to keep such a wife than some people can, but I should wish him to look elsewhere. Still a mother has anxieties, and some young men would take to a bad life in consequence. Besides, if I was obliged to speak, I should say I was not fond of strangers coming into a town."

"I don't know, Selina," said Mrs. Bulstrode with a little emphasis in her turn. "Mr. Bulstrode was a stranger here at one time. Abraham and Moses were strangers in the land, and we are told to entertain strangers. And especially," she added after a slight pause, "when they are unexceptionable."

"I was not speaking in a religious sense, Harriet. I spoke as a mother."

"Selina, I am sure you have never heard me say anything against a niece of mine marrying your son."

"Oh, it is pride in Miss Vincy—I am sure it is nothing else," said Mrs. Plymdale, who had never before given all her confidence to "Harriet" on this subject. "No young man in Middlemarch was good enough for her: I have heard her mother say as much. That is not a Christian spirit, I think. But now, from all I hear, she has found a man as proud as herself."

“You don’t mean that there is anything between Rosamond and Mr. Lydgate?” said Mrs. Bulstrode, rather mortified at finding out her own ignorance.

“Is it possible you don’t know, Harriet?”

“Oh, I go about so little, and I am not fond of gossip; I really never hear any. You see so many people that I don’t see. Your circle is rather different from ours.”

“Well, but your own niece and Mr. Bulstrode’s great favourite—and yours too, I am sure, Harriet! I thought, at one time, you meant him for Kate when she is a little older.”

“I don’t believe there can be anything serious at present,” said Mrs. Bulstrode. “My brother would certainly have told me.”

“Well, people have different ways, but I understand that nobody can see Miss Vincy and Mr. Lydgate together without taking them to be engaged. However, it is not my business. Shall I put up the pattern of mittens?”

After this Mrs. Bulstrode drove to her niece with a mind newly weighted. She was herself handsomely dressed, but she noticed with a little more regret than usual that Rosamond, who was just come in and met her in walking-dress, was almost as expensively equipped. Mrs. Bulstrode was a feminine, smaller edition of her brother and had none of her husband’s low-toned pallor. She had a good honest glance and used no circumlocution.

“You are alone, I see, my dear,” she said as they entered the drawing-room together, looking round gravely. Rosamond felt sure that her aunt had something particular to say, and they sat down near each other. Nevertheless, the quilling inside Rosamond’s bonnet was so charming that it was impossible not to desire the same kind of thing for Kate, and Mrs. Bulstrode’s eyes, which were rather fine, rolled round that ample quilled circuit while she spoke.

“I have just heard something about you that has surprised me very much, Rosamond.”

“What is that, Aunt?” Rosamond’s eyes also were roaming over her aunt’s large embroidered collar.

“I can hardly believe it—that you should be engaged without my knowing it—without your father’s telling me.” Here Mrs. Bulstrode’s eyes finally rested on Rosamond’s, who blushed deeply, and said, “I am not engaged, Aunt.”

“How is it that everyone says so, then—that it is the town’s talk?”

“The town’s talk is of very little consequence, I think,” said Rosamond, inwardly gratified.

“Oh, my dear, be more thoughtful; don’t despise your neighbours so. Remember you are turned twenty-two now, and you will have no fortune: your father, I am sure, will not be able to spare you anything. Mr. Lydgate is very intellectual and clever; I know there is an attraction in that. I like talking to such men myself, and your uncle finds him very useful. But the profession is a poor one here. To be sure, this life is not everything; but it is seldom a medical man has true religious views—there is too much pride of intellect. And you are not fit to marry a poor man.”

“Mr. Lydgate is not a poor man, Aunt. He has very high connexions.”

“He told me himself he was poor.”

“That is because he is used to people who have a high style of living.”

“My dear Rosamond, *you* must not think of living in high style.”

Rosamond looked down and played with her reticule. She was not a fiery young lady and had no sharp answers, but she meant to live as she pleased.

“Then it is really true?” said Mrs. Bulstrode, looking very earnestly at her niece. “You are thinking of Mr. Lydgate; there is some understanding between you, though your father doesn’t know. Be open, my dear Rosamond; Mr. Lydgate has really made you an offer?”

Poor Rosamond’s feelings were very unpleasant. She had been quite easy as to Lydgate’s feeling and intention, but now when her aunt put this question she did not like being unable to say “Yes.” Her pride was hurt, but her habitual control of manner helped her.

“Pray excuse me, Aunt. I would rather not speak on the subject.”

“You would not give your heart to a man without a decided prospect, I trust, my dear. And think of the two excellent offers I know of that you have refused! And one still within your reach if you will not throw it away. I knew a very great beauty who married badly at last by doing so. Mr. Ned Plymdale is a nice young man—some might think good-looking, and an only son, and a large business of that kind is better than a profession. Not that marrying is everything. I would have you seek first the kingdom of God. But a girl should keep her heart within her own power.”

“I should never give it to Mr. Ned Plymdale if it were. I have already refused him. If I loved, I should love at once and without change,” said Rosamond with a great sense of being a romantic heroine and playing the part prettily.

“I see how it is, my dear,” said Mrs. Bulstrode in a melancholy voice, rising to go. “You have allowed your affections to be engaged without return.”

“No, indeed, Aunt,” said Rosamond with emphasis.

“Then you are quite confident that Mr. Lydgate has a serious attachment to you?”

Rosamond’s cheeks by this time were persistently burning, and she felt much mortification. She chose to be silent, and her aunt went away all the more convinced.

Mr. Bulstrode in things worldly and indifferent was disposed to do what his wife bade him, and she now, without telling her reasons, desired him on the next opportunity to find out in conversation with Mr. Lydgate whether he had any intention of marrying soon. The result was a decided negative. Mr. Bulstrode, on being cross-questioned, showed that Lydgate had spoken as no man would who had any attachment that could issue in matrimony. Mrs. Bulstrode now felt that she had a serious duty before her, and she soon managed to arrange a *tête-à-tête* with Lydgate, in which she passed from inquiries about Fred Vincy’s health and expressions of her sincere anxiety for her brother’s large family to general remarks on the dangers which lay before young people with regard to their settlement in life. Young men were often wild and disappointing, making little return for the money spent on them, and a girl was exposed to many circumstances which might interfere with her prospects.

“Especially when she has great attractions and her parents see much company,” said Mrs. Bulstrode. “Gentlemen pay her attention and engross her all to themselves for the mere pleasure of the moment, and that drives off others. I think it is a

heavy responsibility, Mr. Lydgate, to interfere with the prospects of any girl." Here Mrs. Bulstrode fixed her eyes on him with an unmistakable purpose of warning, if not of rebuke.

"Clearly," said Lydgate, looking at her—perhaps even staring a little in return. "On the other hand, a man must be a great coxcomb to go about with a notion that he must not pay attention to a young lady lest she should fall in love with him, or lest others should think she must."

"Oh, Mr. Lydgate, you know well what your advantages are. You know that our young men here cannot cope with you. Where you frequent a house it may militate very much against a girl's making a desirable settlement in life and prevent her from accepting offers even if they are made."

Lydgate was less flattered by his advantage over the Middlemarch Orlandos than he was annoyed by the perception of Mrs. Bulstrode's meaning. She felt that she had spoken as impressively as it was necessary to do and that in using the superior word "militate" she had thrown a noble drapery over a mass of particulars which were still evident enough.

Lydgate was fuming a little, pushed his hair back with one hand, felt curiously in his waistcoat pocket with the other, and then stooped to beckon the tiny black spaniel, which had the insight to decline his hollow caresses. It would not have been decent to go away, because he had been dining with other guests and had just taken tea. But Mrs. Bulstrode, having no doubt that she had been understood, turned the conversation.

Solomon's Proverbs, I think, have omitted to say that as the sore palate findeth grit, so an uneasy consciousness heareth innuendoes. The next day Mr. Farebrother, parting from Lydgate in the street, supposed that they should meet at Vincy's in the evening. Lydgate answered curtly, no—he had work to do—he must give up going out in the evening.

"What, you are going to get lashed to the mast, eh, and are stopping your ears?" said the vicar. "Well, if you don't mean to be won by the sirens, you are right to take precautions in time."

A few days before, Lydgate would have taken no notice of these words as anything more than the vicar's usual way of putting things. They seemed now to convey an innuendo which confirmed the impression that he had been making a fool of himself and behaving so as to be misunderstood: not, he believed, by Rosamond herself; she, he felt sure, took everything as lightly as he intended it. She had an exquisite tact and insight in relation to all points of manners, but the people she lived among were blunderers and busybodies. However, the mistake should go no farther. He resolved—and kept his resolution—that he would not go to Mr. Vincy's except on business.

Rosamond became very unhappy. The uneasiness first stirred by her aunt's questions grew and grew till at the end of ten days that she had not seen Lydgate it grew into terror at the blank that might possibly come—into foreboding of that ready, fatal sponge which so cheaply wipes out the hopes of mortals. The world would have a new dreariness for her, as a wilderness that a magician's spells had turned for a little while into a garden. She felt that she was beginning to know the pang of disappointed love and that no other man could be the occasion of such delightful aerial building as she had been enjoying for the last six months. Poor Rosamond lost her appetite and felt as forlorn as Ariadne—as a charming stage Ariadne left behind with all her boxes full of costumes and no hope of a coach.

There are many wonderful mixtures in the world which are all alike called love and claim the privileges of a sublime rage which is an apology for everything (in literature and the drama). Happily Rosamond did not think of committing any desperate act; she plaited her fair hair as beautifully as usual and kept herself proudly calm. Her most cheerful supposition was that her aunt Bulstrode had interfered in some way to hinder Lydgate's visits; everything was better than a spontaneous indifference in him. Anyone who imagines ten days too short a time, not for falling into leanness, lightness, or other measurable effects of passion, but for the whole spiritual circuit of alarmed conjecture and disappointment, is ignorant of what can go on in the elegant leisure of a young lady's mind.

On the eleventh day, however, Lydgate when leaving Stone Court was requested by Mrs. Vincy to let her husband know that there was a marked change in Mr. Featherstone's health and that she wished him to come to Stone Court on that day. Now Lydgate might have called at the warehouse, or might have written a message on a leaf of his pocket-book and left it at the door. Yet these simple devices apparently did not occur to him, from which we may conclude that he had no strong objection to calling at the house at an hour when Mr. Vincy was not at home and leaving the message with Miss Vincy. A man may, from various motives, decline to give his company, but perhaps not even a sage would be gratified that nobody missed him. It would be a graceful, easy way of piecing on the new habits to the old to have a few playful words with Rosamond about his resistance to dissipation and his firm resolve to take long fast even from sweet sounds. It must be confessed, also, that momentary speculations as to all the possible grounds for Mrs. Bulstrode's hints had managed to get woven like slight, clinging hairs into the more substantial web of his thoughts.

Miss Vincy was alone, and blushed so deeply when Lydgate came in that he felt a corresponding embarrassment, and instead of any playfulness, he began at once to speak of his reason for calling and to beg her, almost formally, to deliver the message to her father. Rosamond, who at the first moment felt as if her happiness were returning, was keenly hurt by Lydgate's manner; her blush had departed, and she assented coldly, without adding an unnecessary word, some trivial chain-work which she had in her hands enabling her to avoid looking at Lydgate higher than his chin. In all failures, the beginning is certainly the half of the whole. After sitting two long moments while he moved his whip and could say nothing, Lydgate rose to go, and Rosamond, made nervous by her struggle between mortification and the wish not to betray it, dropped her chain as if startled, and rose too, mechanically. Lydgate instantaneously stooped to pick up the chain. When he rose he was very near to a lovely little face set on a fair long neck which he had been used to see turning about under the most perfect management of self-contented grace. But as he raised his eyes now he saw a certain helpless quivering which touched him quite newly and made him look at Rosamond with a questioning flash. At this moment she was as natural as she had ever been when she was five years old: she felt that her tears had risen, and it was no use to try to do anything else than let them stay like water on a blue flower or let them fall over her cheeks, even as they would.

That moment of naturalness was the crystallizing feather-touch; it shook flirtation into love. Remember that the ambitious man who was looking at those forget-me-nots under the water was very warm-hearted and rash. He did not know where the chain went; an idea had thrilled through the recesses within him which had a miraculous effect in raising the power of passionate love lying buried there in no sealed sepulchre, but under the lightest, easily pierced mould. His

words were quite abrupt and awkward, but the tone made them sound like an ardent, appealing avowal.

"What is the matter? You are distressed. Tell me—pray." Rosamond had never been spoken to in such tones before. I am not sure that she knew what the words were; but she looked at Lydgate and the tears fell over her cheeks. There could have been no more complete answer than that silence, and Lydgate, forgetting everything else, completely mastered by the outrush of tenderness at the sudden belief that this sweet young creature depended on him for her joy, actually put his arms round her, folding her gently and protectingly—he was used to being gentle with the weak and suffering—and kissed each of the two large tears. This was a strange way of arriving at an understanding, but it was a short way. Rosamond was not angry, but she moved backward a little in timid happiness, and Lydgate could now sit near her and speak less incompletely. Rosamond had to make her little confession, and he poured out words of gratitude and tenderness with impulsive lavishment. In half an hour he left the house an engaged man, whose soul was not his own, but the woman's to whom he had bound himself.

He came again in the evening to speak with Mr. Vincy, who, just returned from Stone Court, was feeling sure that it would not be long before he heard of Mr. Featherstone's demise. The felicitous word "demise," which had seasonably occurred to him, had raised his spirits even above their usual evening pitch. The right word is always a power and communicates its definiteness to our action. Considered as a demise, old Featherstone's death assumed a merely legal aspect so that Mr. Vincy could tap his snuff-box over it and be jovial, without even an intermittent affectation of solemnity; and Mr. Vincy hated both solemnity and affectation. Who was ever awe-struck about a testator or sang a hymn on the title to real property? Mr. Vincy was inclined to take a jovial view of all things that evening: he even observed to Lydgate that Fred had got the family constitution after all and would soon be as fine a fellow as ever again; and, when his approbation of Rosamond's engagement was asked for, he gave it with astonishing facility, passing at once to general remarks on the desirableness of matrimony for young men and maidens and apparently deducing from the whole the appropriateness of a little more punch.

CHAPTER 32

They'll take suggestion as a cat laps milk.

—SHAKESPEARE: *Tempest*

The triumphant confidence of the mayor founded on Mr. Featherstone's insistent demand that Fred and his mother should not leave him was a feeble emotion compared with all that was agitating the breasts of the old man's blood-relations, who naturally manifested more their sense of the family tie and were more visibly numerous now that he had become bedridden. Naturally: for when "poor Peter" had occupied his arm-chair in the wainscoted parlour, no assiduous beetles for whom the cook prepares boiling water could have been less welcome on a hearth which they had reasons for preferring than those persons whose Featherstone blood was ill-nourished, not from penuriousness on their part, but from poverty. Brother Solomon and sister Jane were rich, and the family candour and total abstinence from false politeness with which they were always received seemed to them no argument that their brother in the solemn act of making his will would overlook the superior claims of wealth. Themselves at least he had never been unnatural enough to banish from his house, and it seemed hardly eccentric that he should have kept away brother Jonah, sister Martha, and the rest, who had no shadow of such claims. They knew Peter's maxim, that money was a good egg and should be laid in a warm nest.

But brother Jonah, sister Martha, and all the needy exiles held a different point of view. Probabilities are as various as the faces to be seen at will in fretwork or paperhangings: every form is there, from Jupiter to Judy, if you only look with creative inclination. To the poorer and least favoured it seemed likely that since Peter had done nothing for them in his life, he would remember them at the last. Jonah argued that men liked to make a surprise of their wills, while Martha said that nobody need be surprised if he left the best part of his money to those who least expected it. Also it was not to be thought but that an own brother "lying there" with dropsy in his legs must come to feel that blood was thicker than water, and if he didn't alter his will, he might have money by him. At any rate some blood-relations should be on the premises and on the watch against those who were hardly relations at all. Such things had been known as forged wills and disputed wills, which seemed to have the golden-hazy advantage of somehow enabling non-legatees to live out of them. Again, those who were no blood-relations might be caught making away with things—and poor Peter "lying there" helpless! Somebody should be on the watch. But in this conclusion they were at one with Solomon and Jane; also, some nephews, nieces, and cousins, arguing with still greater subtlety as to what might be done by a man able to "will away" his property and give himself large treats of oddity, felt in a handsome sort of way that there was a family interest to be attended to, and thought of Stone Court as a place which it would be nothing but right for them to visit. Sister Martha, otherwise Mrs. Cranch, living with some wheeziness in the Chalky Flats, could not undertake the journey; but her son, as being poor Peter's own nephew, could represent her advantageously and watch lest his uncle Jonah should make an unfair use of the improbable things which seemed likely to happen. In fact there was a general sense running in the Featherstone blood that everybody must watch everybody else and that it would be well for everybody else to reflect that the Almighty was watching him.

Thus Stone Court continually saw one or other blood-relation alighting or departing, and Mary Garth had the unpleasant task of carrying their messages to Mr. Featherstone, who would see none of them and sent her down with the still more unpleasant task of telling them so. As manager of the household she felt bound to ask them in good provincial fashion to stay and eat, but she chose to consult Mrs. Vincy on the point of extra downstairs consumption now that Mr. Featherstone was laid up.

"Oh, my dear, you must do things handsomely where there's last illness and a property. God knows, *I* don't grudge them every ham in the house—only, save the best for the funeral. Have some stuffed veal always, and a fine cheese in cut. You must expect to keep open house in these last illnesses," said liberal Mrs. Vincy, once more of cheerful note and bright plumage.

But some of the visitors alighted and did not depart after the handsome treating to veal and ham. Brother Jonah, for example (there are such unpleasant people in most families; perhaps even in the highest aristocracy there are Brobdingnag specimens, gigantically in debt and bloated at greater expense)—brother Jonah, I say, having come down in the world, was mainly supported by a calling which he was modest enough not to boast of, though it was much better than swindling either on exchange or turf, but which did not require his presence at Brassing so long as he had a good corner to sit in and a supply of food. He chose the kitchen-corner, partly because he liked it best and partly because he did not want to sit with Solomon, concerning whom he had a strong brotherly opinion. Seated in a famous arm-chair and in his best suit, constantly within sight of good cheer, he had a comfortable consciousness of being on the premises, mingled with fleeting suggestions of Sunday and the bar at the Green Man; and he informed Mary Garth that he should not go out of reach of his brother Peter while that poor fellow was above ground. The troublesome ones in a family are usually either the wits or the idiots. Jonah was the wit among the Featherstones and joked with the maidservants when they came about the hearth, but seemed to consider Miss Garth a suspicious character and followed her with cold eyes.

Mary would have borne this one pair of eyes with comparative ease, but unfortunately there was young Cranch, who, having come all the way from the Chalky Flats to represent his mother and watch his uncle Jonah, also felt it his duty to stay and to sit chiefly in the kitchen to give his uncle company. Young Cranch was not exactly the balancing point between

the wit and the idiot, verging slightly towards the latter type and squinting so as to leave everything in doubt about his sentiments except that they were not of a forcible character. When Mary Garth entered the kitchen and Mr. Jonah Featherstone began to follow her with his cold detective eyes, young Cranch, turning his head in the same direction, seemed to insist on it that she should remark how he was squinting, as if he did it with design, like the gypsies when Borrow read the New Testament to them. This was rather too much for poor Mary; sometimes it made her bilious, sometimes it upset her gravity. One day that she had an opportunity she could not resist describing the kitchen scene to Fred, who would not be hindered from immediately going to see it, affecting simply to pass through. But no sooner did he face the four eyes than he had to rush through the nearest door, which happened to lead to the dairy, and there under the high roof and among the pans he gave way to laughter which made a hollow resonance perfectly audible in the kitchen. He fled by another doorway, but Mr. Jonah, who had not before seen Fred's white complexion, long legs, and pinched delicacy of face, prepared many sarcasms in which these points of appearance were wittily combined with the lowest moral attributes.

"Why, Tom, *you* don't wear such gentlemanly trousers—*you* haven't got half such fine long legs," said Jonah to his nephew, winking at the same time to imply that there was something more in these statements than their undeniableness. Tom looked at his legs, but left it uncertain whether he preferred his moral advantages to a more vicious length of limb and reprehensible gentility of trouser.

In the large wainscoted parlour too there were constantly pairs of eyes on the watch, and own relatives eager to be "sitters-up." Many came, lunched, and departed, but brother Solomon and the lady who had been Jane Featherstone for twenty-five years before she was Mrs. Waule found it good to be there every day for hours, without other calculable occupation than that of observing the cunning Mary Garth (who was so deep that she could be found out in nothing) and giving occasional dry, wrinkly indications of crying—as if capable of torrents in a wetter season—at the thought that they were not allowed to go into Mr. Featherstone's room. For the old man's dislike of his own family seemed to get stronger as he got less able to amuse himself by saying biting things to them. Too languid to sting, he had the more venom refluent in his blood.

Not fully believing the message sent through Mary Garth, they had presented themselves together within the door of the bedroom, both in black—Mrs. Waule having a white handkerchief partially unfolded in her hand—and both with faces in a sort of half-mourning purple, while Mrs. Vincy with her pink cheeks and pink ribbons flying was actually administering a cordial to their own brother, and the light-complexioned Fred, his short hair curling as might be expected in a gambler's, was lolling at his ease in a large chair.

Old Featherstone no sooner caught sight of these funereal figures appearing in spite of his orders than rage came to strengthen him more successfully than the cordial. He was propped up on a bed-rest and always had his gold-headed stick lying by him. He seized it now and swept it backwards and forwards in as large an area as he could, apparently to ban these ugly spectres, crying in a hoarse sort of screech, "Back, back, Mrs. Waule! Back, Solomon!"

"Oh, Brother Peter," Mrs. Waule began, but Solomon put his hand before her repressingly. He was a large-cheeked man, nearly seventy, with small furtive eyes, and was not only of much blander temper but thought himself much deeper than his brother Peter, indeed not likely to be deceived in any of his fellow-men, inasmuch as they could not well be more greedy and deceitful than he suspected them of being. Even the invisible powers, he thought, were likely to be soothed by a bland parenthesis here and there—coming from a man of property, who might have been as impious as others.

"Brother Peter," he said in a wheedling yet gravely official tone, "it's nothing but right I should speak to you about the Three Crofts and the manganese. The Almighty knows what I've got on my mind—"

"Then He knows more than I want to know," said Peter, laying down his stick with a show of truce which had a threat in it too, for he reversed the stick so as to make the gold handle a club in case of closer fighting and looked hard at Solomon's bald head.

"There's things you might repent of, Brother, for want of speaking to me," said Solomon, not advancing, however. "I could sit up with you tonight, and Jane with me, willingly, and you might take your own time to speak, or let me speak."

"Yes, I shall take my own time—you needn't offer me yours," said Peter.

"But you can't take your own time to die in, Brother," began Mrs. Waule with her usual woolly tone. "And when you lie speechless you may be tired of having strangers about you, and you may think of me and my children—" But here her voice broke under the touching thought which she was attributing to her speechless brother, the mention of ourselves being naturally affecting.

"No, I shan't," said old Featherstone contradictiously. "I shan't think of any of you. I've made my will, I tell you. I've made my will." Here he turned his head towards Mrs. Vincy and swallowed some more of his cordial.

"Some people would be ashamed to fill up a place belonging by rights to others," said Mrs. Waule, turning her narrow eyes in the same direction.

"Oh, Sister," said Solomon with ironical softness, "you and me are not fine, and handsome, and clever enough: we must be humble and let smart people push themselves before us."

Fred's spirit could not bear this; rising and looking at Mr. Featherstone, he said, "Shall my mother and I leave the room, sir, that you may be alone with your friends?"

"Sit down, I tell you," said old Featherstone snappishly. "Stop where you are. Good-bye, Solomon," he added, trying to wield his stick again, but failing now that he had reversed the handle. "Good-bye, Mrs. Waule. Don't you come again."

"I shall be downstairs, Brother, whether or no," said Solomon. "I shall do *my* duty, and it remains to be seen what the Almighty will allow."

"Yes, in property going out of families," said Mrs. Waule in continuation, "and where there's steady young men to carry on. But I pity them who are not such, and I pity their mothers. Good-bye, Brother Peter."

"Remember, I'm the eldest after you, Brother, and prospered from the first, just as you did, and have got land already by the name of Featherstone," said Solomon, relying much on that reflection, as one which might be suggested in the watches of the night. "But I bid you good-bye for the present."

Their exit was hastened by their seeing old Mr. Featherstone pull his wig on each side and shut his eyes with his mouth-widening grimace, as if he were determined to be deaf and blind.

None the less they came to Stone Court daily and sat below at the post of duty, sometimes carrying on a slow dialogue in an undertone in which the observation and response were so far apart that anyone hearing them might have imagined himself listening to speaking automata, in some doubt whether the ingenious mechanism would really work, or wind itself up for a long time in order to stick and be silent. Solomon and Jane would have been sorry to be quick: what that led to might be seen on the other side of the wall in the person of brother Jonah.

But their watch in the wainscoted parlour was sometimes varied by the presence of other guests from far or near. Now that Peter Featherstone was upstairs, his property could be discussed with all that local enlightenment to be found on the spot: some rural and Middlemarch neighbours expressed much agreement with the family and sympathy with their interest against the Vincys, and feminine visitors were even moved to tears in conversation with Mrs. Waule when they recalled the fact that they themselves had been disappointed in times past by codicils and marriages for spite on the part of ungrateful elderly gentlemen, who, it might have been supposed, had been spared for something better. Such conversation paused suddenly like an organ when the bellows are let drop if Mary Garth came into the room, and all eyes were turned on her as a possible legatee or one who might get access to iron chests.

But the younger men who were relatives or connexions of the family were disposed to admire her in this problematic light as a girl who showed much conduct and who among all the chances that were flying might turn out to be at least a moderate prize. Hence she had her share of compliments and polite attentions.

Especially from Mr. Borthrop Trumbull, a distinguished bachelor and auctioneer of those parts much concerned in the sale of land and cattle: a public character, indeed, whose name was seen on widely distributed placards and who might reasonably be sorry for those who did not know of him. He was second cousin to Peter Featherstone and had been treated by him with more amenity than any other relative, being useful in matters of business; and in that program of his funeral which the old man had himself dictated, he had been named as a bearer. There was no odious cupidity in Mr. Borthrop Trumbull—nothing more than a sincere sense of his own merit, which, he was aware, in case of rivalry might tell against competitors, so that if Peter Featherstone, who so far as he, Trumbull, was concerned, had behaved like as good a soul as ever breathed, should have done anything handsome by him, all he could say was that he had never fished and fawned, but had advised him to the best of his experience, which now extended over twenty years from the time of his apprenticeship at fifteen and was likely to yield a knowledge of no surreptitious kind. His admiration was far from being confined to himself, but was accustomed professionally as well as privately to delight in estimating things at a high rate. He was an amateur of superior phrases and never used poor language without immediately correcting himself—which was fortunate, as he was rather loud and given to predominate, standing or walking about frequently, pulling down his waistcoat with the air of a man who is very much of his own opinion, trimming himself rapidly with his forefinger, and marking each new series in these movements by a busy play with his large seals. There was occasionally a little fierceness in his demeanour, but it was directed chiefly against false opinion, of which there is so much to correct in the world that a man of some reading and experience necessarily has his patience tried. He felt that the Featherstone family generally was of limited understanding, but being a man of the world and a public character, took everything as a matter of course and even went to converse with Mr. Jonah and young Cranch in the kitchen, not doubting that he had impressed the latter greatly by his leading questions concerning the Chalky Flats. If anybody had observed that Mr. Borthrop Trumbull, being an auctioneer, was bound to know the nature of everything, he would have smiled and trimmed himself silently with the sense that he came pretty near that. On the whole, in an auctioneering way, he was an honourable man, not ashamed of his business and feeling that "the celebrated Peel, now Sir Robert," if introduced to him, would not fail to recognize his importance.

"I don't mind if I have a slice of that ham and a glass of that ale, Miss Garth, if you will allow me," he said, coming into the parlour at half past eleven after having had the exceptional privilege of seeing old Featherstone and standing with his back to the fire between Mrs. Waule and Solomon. "It's not necessary for you to go out; let me ring the bell."

"Thank you," said Mary, "I have an errand."

"Well, Mr. Trumbull, you're highly favoured," said Mrs. Waule.

"What, seeing the old man?" said the auctioneer, playing with his seals dispassionately. "Ah, you see he has relied on me considerably." Here he pressed his lips together and frowned meditatively.

"Might anybody ask what their brother has been saying?" said Solomon in a soft tone of humility, in which he had a sense of luxurious cunning, he being a rich man and not in need of it.

"Oh yes, anybody may ask," said Mr. Trumbull with loud and good-humoured though cutting sarcasm. "Anybody may interrogate. Anyone may give their remarks an interrogative turn," he continued, his sonorousness rising with his style. "This is constantly done by good speakers, even when they anticipate no answer. It is what we call a figure of speech—speech at a high figure, as one may say." The eloquent auctioneer smiled at his own ingenuity.

"I shouldn't be sorry to hear he'd remembered *you*, Mr. Trumbull," said Solomon. "I never was against the deserving. It's the undeserving I'm against."

"Ah, there it is, you see, there it is," said Mr. Trumbull significantly. "It can't be denied that undeserving people have been legatees, and even residuary legatees. It is so, with testamentary dispositions." Again he pursed up his lips and frowned a little.

"Do you mean to say for certain, Mr. Trumbull, that my brother has left his land away from our family?" said Mrs. Waule, on whom, as an unhopeful woman, those long words had a depressing effect.

"A man might as well turn his land into charity land at once as leave it to some people," observed Solomon, his sister's question having drawn no answer.

"What, Blue-Coat land?" said Mrs. Waule again. "Oh, Mr. Trumbull, you never can mean to say that. It would be flying in the face of the Almighty that's prospered him."

While Mrs. Waule was speaking, Mr. Borthrop Trumbull walked away from the fireplace towards the window, patrolling with his forefinger round the inside of his stock, then along his whiskers and the curves of his hair. He now walked to Miss

Garth's work-table, opened a book which lay there, and read the title aloud with pompous emphasis as if he were offering it for sale: "*Anne of Geierstein* (pronounced Jeersteen), *or the Maiden of the Mist, by the Author of 'Waverley*.'" Then turning the page, he began sonorously, "The course of four centuries has well-nigh elapsed since the series of events which are related in the following chapters took place on the Continent." He pronounced the last truly admirable word with the accent on the last syllable, not as unaware of vulgar usage, but feeling that this novel delivery enhanced the sonorous beauty which his reading had given to the whole.

And now the servant came in with the tray so that the moments for answering Mrs. Waule's question had gone by safely, while she and Solomon, watching Mr. Trumbull's movements, were thinking that high learning interfered sadly with serious affairs. Mr. Borthrop Trumbull really knew nothing about old Featherstone's will, but he could hardly have been brought to declare any ignorance unless he had been arrested for misprision of treason.

"I shall take a mere mouthful of ham and a glass of ale," he said reassuringly. "As a man with public business, I take a snack when I can. I will back this ham," he added after swallowing some morsels with alarming haste, "against any ham in the three kingdoms. In my opinion it is better than the hams at Freshitt Hall—and I think I am a tolerable judge."

"Some don't like so much sugar in their hams," said Mrs. Waule. "But my poor brother would always have sugar."

"If any person demands better, he is at liberty to do so; but, God bless me, what an aroma! I should be glad to buy-in that quality, I know. There is some gratification to a gentleman"—here Mr. Trumbull's voice conveyed an emotional remonstrance—"in having this kind of ham set on his table."

He pushed aside his plate, poured out his glass of ale, and drew his chair a little forward, profiting by the occasion to look at the inner side of his legs, which he stroked approvingly—Mr. Trumbull having all those less frivolous airs and gestures which distinguish the predominant races of the North.

"You have an interesting work there, I see, Miss Garth," he observed when Mary re-entered. "It is by the author of *Waverley*, that is, Sir Walter Scott. I have bought one of his works myself—a very nice thing, a very superior publication, entitled *Ivanhoe*. You will not get any writer to beat him in a hurry, I think—he will not, in my opinion, be speedily surpassed. I have just been reading a portion at the commencement of *Anne of Jeersteen*. It commences well." (Things never began with Mr. Borthrop Trumbull: they always commenced, both in private life and on his handbills.) "You are a reader, I see. Do you subscribe to our Middlemarch library?"

"No," said Mary. "Mr. Fred Vincy brought this book."

"I am a great bookman myself," returned Mr. Trumbull. "I have no less than two hundred volumes in calf, and I flatter myself they are well selected. Also pictures by Murillo, Rubens, Teniers, Titian, Vandyck, and others. I shall be happy to lend you any work you like to mention, Miss Garth."

"I am much obliged," said Mary, hastening away again, "but I have little time for reading."

"I should say my brother has done something for *her* in his will," said Mr. Solomon in a very low undertone when she had shut the door behind her, pointing with his head towards the absent Mary.

"His first wife was a poor match for him, though," said Mrs. Waule. "She brought him nothing, and this young woman is only her niece. And very proud. And my brother has always paid her wage."

"A sensible girl though, in my opinion," said Mr. Trumbull, finishing his ale and starting up with an emphatic adjustment of his waistcoat. "I have observed her when she has been mixing medicine in drops. She minds what she is doing, sir. That is a great point in a woman, and a great point for our friend upstairs, poor dear old soul. A man whose life is of any value should think of his wife as a nurse; that is what I should do if I married, and I believe I have lived single long enough not to make a mistake in that line. Some men must marry to elevate themselves a little, but when I am in need of that, I hope someone will tell me so—I hope some individual will apprise me of the fact. I wish you good morning, Mrs. Waule. Good morning, Mr. Solomon. I trust we shall meet under less melancholy auspices."

When Mr. Trumbull had departed with a fine bow, Solomon, leaning forward, observed to his sister, "You may depend, Jane, my brother has left that girl a lumping sum."

"Anybody would think so from the way Mr. Trumbull talks," said Jane. Then, after a pause, "He talks as if my daughters wasn't to be trusted to give drops."

"Auctioneers talk wild," said Solomon. "Not but what Trumbull has made money."

CHAPTER 33

Close up his eyes and draw the curtain close;
And let us all to meditation.

—2 Henry VI

That night after twelve o'clock Mary Garth relieved the watch in Mr. Featherstone's room and sat there alone through the small hours. She often chose this task, in which she found some pleasure, notwithstanding the old man's testiness whenever he demanded her attentions. There were intervals in which she could sit perfectly still, enjoying the outer stillness and the subdued light. The red fire with its gently audible movement seemed like a solemn existence calmly independent of the petty passions, the imbecile desires, the straining after worthless uncertainties, which were daily moving her contempt. Mary was fond of her own thoughts and could amuse herself well sitting in twilight with her hands in her lap; for having early had strong reason to believe that things were not likely to be arranged for her peculiar satisfaction, she wasted no time in astonishment and annoyance at that fact. And she had already come to take life very much as a comedy in which she had a proud, nay, a generous resolution not to act the mean or treacherous part. Mary might have become cynical if she had not had parents whom she honoured and a well of affectionate gratitude within her which was all the fuller because she had learned to make no unreasonable claims.

She sat tonight revolving, as she was wont, the scenes of the day, her lips often curling with amusement at the oddities to which her fancy added fresh drollery: people were so ridiculous with their illusions, carrying their fool's caps unawares, thinking their own lies opaque while everybody else's were transparent, making themselves exceptions to everything, as if when all the world looked yellow under a lamp they alone were rosy. Yet there were some illusions under Mary's eyes which were not quite comic to her. She was secretly convinced, though she had no other grounds than her close observation of old Featherstone's nature, that in spite of his fondness for having the Vincys about him, they were as likely to be disappointed as any of the relations whom he kept at a distance. She had a good deal of disdain for Mrs. Vincy's evident alarm lest she and Fred should be alone together, but it did not hinder her from thinking anxiously of the way in which Fred would be affected if it should turn out that his uncle had left him as poor as ever. She could make a butt of Fred when he was present, but she did not enjoy his follies when he was absent.

Yet she liked her thoughts; a vigorous young mind not over-balanced by passion finds a good in making acquaintance with life and watches its own powers with interest. Mary had plenty of merriment within.

Her thought was not veined by any solemnity or pathos about the old man on the bed: such sentiments are easier to affect than to feel about an aged creature whose life is not visibly anything but a remnant of vices. She had always seen the most disagreeable side of Mr. Featherstone; he was not proud of her, and she was only useful to him. To be anxious about a soul that is always snapping at you must be left to the saints of the earth, and Mary was not one of them. She had never returned him a harsh word and had waited on him faithfully: that was her utmost. Old Featherstone himself was not in the least anxious about his soul and had declined to see Mr. Tucker on the subject.

Tonight he had not once snapped, and for the first hour or two he lay remarkably still, until at last Mary heard him rattling his bunch of keys against the tin box which he always kept in the bed beside him. About three o'clock he said with remarkable distinctness, "Missy, come here!"

Mary obeyed and found that he had already drawn the tin box from under the clothes, though he usually asked to have this done for him; and he had selected the key. He now unlocked the box, and drawing from it another key, looked straight at her with eyes that seemed to have recovered all their sharpness and said, "How many of 'em are in the house?"

"You mean of your own relations, sir," said Mary, well used to the old man's way of speech. He nodded slightly, and she went on, "Mr. Jonah Featherstone and young Cranch are sleeping here."

"Oh, ay, they stick, do they? And the rest—they come every day, I'll warrant—Solomon and Jane, and all the young uns? They come peeping and counting and casting up?"

"Not all of them every day. Mr. Solomon and Mrs. Waule are here every day, and the others come often."

The old man listened with a grimace while she spoke, and then said, relaxing his face, "The more fools they. You hearken, Missy. It's three o'clock in the morning, and I've got all my faculties as well as ever I had in my life. I know all my property, and where the money's put out, and everything. And I've made everything ready to change my mind and do as I like at the last. Do you hear, Missy? I've got my faculties."

"Well, sir?" said Mary quietly.

He now lowered his tone with an air of deeper cunning. "I've made two wills, and I'm going to burn one. Now you do as I tell you. This is the key of my iron chest, in the closet there. You push well at the side of the brass plate at the top till it goes like a bolt; then you can put the key in the front lock and turn it. See and do that, and take out the topmost paper —'Last Will and Testament'—big printed."

"No, sir," said Mary in a firm voice, "I cannot do that."

"Not do it? I tell you, you must," said the old man, his voice beginning to shake under the shock of this resistance.

"I cannot touch your iron chest or your will. I must refuse to do anything that might lay me open to suspicion."

“I tell you, I’m in my right mind. Shan’t I do as I like at the last? I made two wills on purpose. Take the key, I say.”

“No, sir, I will not,” said Mary, more resolutely still. Her repulsion was getting stronger.

“I tell you, there’s no time to lose.”

“I cannot help that, sir. I will not let the close of your life soil the beginning of mine. I will not touch your iron chest or your will.” She moved to a little distance from the bedside.

The old man paused with a blank stare for a little while, holding the one key erect on the ring; then with an agitated jerk he began to work with his bony left hand at emptying the tin box before him.

“Missy,” he began to say hurriedly, “look here! Take the money—the notes and gold—look here—take it—you shall have it all—do as I tell you.”

He made an effort to stretch out the key towards her as far as possible, and Mary again retreated.

“I will not touch your key or your money, sir. Pray don’t ask me to do it again. If you do, I must go and call your brother.”

He let his hand fall, and for the first time in her life Mary saw old Peter Featherstone begin to cry childishly. She said in as gentle a tone as she could command, “Pray put up your money, sir,” and then went away to her seat by the fire, hoping this would help to convince him that it was useless to say more.

Presently he rallied and said eagerly, “Look here, then. Call the young chap. Call Fred Vincy.”

Mary’s heart began to beat more quickly. Various ideas rushed through her mind as to what the burning of a second will might imply. She had to make a difficult decision in a hurry.

“I will call him if you will let me call Mr. Jonah and others with him.”

“Nobody else, I say. The young chap. I shall do as I like.”

“Wait till broad daylight, sir, when everyone is stirring. Or let me call Simmons now to go and fetch the lawyer. He can be here in less than two hours.”

“Lawyer? What do I want with the lawyer? Nobody shall know—I say, nobody shall know. I shall do as I like.”

“Let me call someone else, sir,” said Mary persuasively. She did not like her position—alone with the old man, who seemed to show a strange flaring of nervous energy which enabled him to speak again and again without falling into his usual cough; yet she desired not to push unnecessarily the contradiction which agitated him. “Let me, pray, call someone else.”

“You let me alone, I say. Look here, Missy. Take the money. You’ll never have the chance again. It’s pretty nigh two hundred—there’s more in the box, and nobody knows how much there was. Take it and do as I tell you.”

Mary, standing by the fire, saw its red light falling on the old man, propped up on his pillows and bed-rest, with his bony hand holding out the key and the money lying on the quilt before him. She never forgot that vision of a man wanting to do as he liked at the last. But the way in which he had put the offer of the money urged her to speak with harder resolution than ever.

“It is of no use, sir. I will not do it. Put up your money. I will not touch your money. I will do anything else I can to comfort you, but I will not touch your keys or your money.”

“Anything else—anything else!” said old Featherstone with hoarse rage, which, as if in a nightmare, tried to be loud and yet was only just audible. “I want nothing else. You come here—you come here.”

Mary approached him cautiously, knowing him too well. She saw him dropping his keys and trying to grasp his stick, while he looked at her like an aged hyena, the muscles of his face getting distorted with the effort of his hand. She paused at a safe distance.

“Let me give you some cordial,” she said quietly, “and try to compose yourself. You will perhaps go to sleep. And tomorrow by daylight you can do as you like.”

He lifted the stick in spite of her being beyond his reach and threw it with a hard effort which was but impotence. It fell, slipping over the foot of the bed. Mary let it lie and retreated to her chair by the fire. By and by she would go to him with the cordial. Fatigue would make him passive. It was getting towards the chilliest moment of the morning, the fire had got low, and she could see through the chink between the moreen window-curtains the light whitened by the blind. Having put some wood on the fire and thrown a shawl over her, she sat down, hoping that Mr. Featherstone might now fall asleep. If she went near him the irritation might be kept up. He had said nothing after throwing the stick, but she had seen him taking his keys again and laying his right hand on the money. He did not put it up, however, and she thought that he was dropping off to sleep.

But Mary herself began to be more agitated by the remembrance of what she had gone through than she had been by the reality—questioning those acts of hers which had come imperatively and excluded all question in the critical moment.

Presently the dry wood sent out a flame which illuminated every crevice, and Mary saw that the old man was lying quietly with his head turned a little on one side. She went towards him with inaudible steps and thought that his face looked strangely motionless; but the next moment the movement of the flame communicating itself to all objects made her uncertain. The violent beating of her heart rendered her perceptions so doubtful that even when she touched him and listened for his breathing she could not trust her conclusions. She went to the window and gently propped aside the curtain and blind so that the still light of the sky fell on the bed.

The next moment she ran to the bell and rang it energetically. In a very little while there was no longer any doubt that Peter Featherstone was dead, with his right hand clasping the keys and his left hand lying on the heap of notes and gold.

BOOK IV

THREE LOVE PROBLEMS

CHAPTER 34

1ST GENT. Such men as this are feathers, chips, and straws,
Carry no weight, no force.
2ND GENT. But levity
Is casual too, and makes the sum of weight.
For power finds its place in lack of power;
Advance is cession, and the driven ship
May run aground because the helmsman's thought
Lacked force to balance opposites.

It was on a morning of May that Peter Featherstone was buried. In the prosaic neighbourhood of Middlemarch, May was not always warm and sunny, and on this particular morning a chill wind was blowing the blossoms from the surrounding gardens on to the green mounds of Lowick churchyard. Swiftly moving clouds only now and then allowed a gleam to light up any object, whether ugly or beautiful, that happened to stand within its golden shower. In the churchyard the objects were remarkably various, for there was a little country crowd waiting to see the funeral. The news had spread that it was to be a "big burying"; the old gentleman had left written directions about everything and meant to have a funeral "beyond his betters." This was true, for old Featherstone had not been a Harpagon whose passions had all been devoured by the ever-lean and ever-hungry passion of saving and who would drive a bargain with his undertaker beforehand. He loved money, but he also loved to spend it in gratifying his peculiar tastes, and perhaps he loved it best of all as a means of making others feel his power more or less uncomfortably. If anyone will here contend that there must have been traits of goodness in old Featherstone, I will not presume to deny this; but I must observe that goodness is of a modest nature, easily discouraged, and when much elbowed in early life by unabashed vices, is apt to retire into extreme privacy so that it is more easily believed in by those who construct a selfish old gentleman theoretically than by those who form the narrower judgements based on his personal acquaintance. In any case, he had been bent on having a handsome funeral and on having persons "bid" to it who would rather have stayed at home. He had even desired that female relatives should follow him to the grave, and poor sister Martha had taken a difficult journey for this purpose from the Chalky Flats. She and Jane would have been altogether cheered (in a tearful manner) by this sign that a brother who disliked seeing them while he was living had been prospectively fond of their presence when he should have become a testator if the sign had not been made equivocal by being extended to Mrs. Vincy, whose expense in handsome crape seemed to imply the most presumptuous hopes, aggravated by a bloom of complexion which told pretty plainly that she was not a blood-relation but of that generally objectionable class called wife's kin.

We are all of us imaginative in some form or other, for images are the brood of desire; and poor old Featherstone, who laughed much at the way in which others cajoled themselves, did not escape the fellowship of illusion. In writing the program for his burial he certainly did not make clear to himself that his pleasure in the little drama of which it formed a part was confined to anticipation. In chuckling over the vexations he could inflict by the rigid clutch of his dead hand, he inevitably mingled his consciousness with that livid, stagnant presence, and so far as he was preoccupied with a future life, it was with one of gratification inside his coffin. Thus old Featherstone was imaginative after his fashion.

However, the three mourning-coaches were filled according to the written orders of the deceased. There were pall-bearers on horseback, with the richest scarves and hatbands, and even the under-bearers had trappings of woe which were of a good, well-priced quality. The black procession, when dismounted, looked the larger for the smallness of the churchyard; the heavy human faces and the black draperies shivering in the wind seemed to tell of a world strangely incongruous with the lightly dropping blossoms and the gleams of sunshine on the daisies. The clergyman who met the procession was Mr. Cadwallader, also according to the request of Peter Featherstone, prompted as usual by peculiar reasons. Having a contempt for curates, whom he always called understrappers, he was resolved to be buried by a beneficed clergyman. Mr. Casaubon was out of the question, not merely because he declined duty of this sort, but because Featherstone had an especial dislike to him as the rector of his own parish, who had a lien on the land in the shape of tithe, also as the deliverer of morning sermons, which the old man, being in his pew and not at all sleepy, had been obliged to sit through with an inward snarl. He had an objection to a parson stuck up above his head preaching to him. But his relations with Mr. Cadwallader had been of a different kind: the trout-stream which ran through Mr. Casaubon's land took its course through Featherstone's also, so that Mr. Cadwallader was a parson who had had to ask a favour instead of preaching. Moreover, he was one of the high gentry living four miles away from Lowick and was thus exalted to an equal sky with the sheriff of the county and other dignities vaguely regarded as necessary to the system of things. There would be a satisfaction in being buried by Mr. Cadwallader, whose very name offered a fine opportunity for pronouncing wrongly if you liked.

This distinction conferred on the rector of Tipton and Freshitt was the reason why Mrs. Cadwallader made one of the group that watched old Featherstone's funeral from an upper window of the manor. She was not fond of visiting that house, but she liked, as she said, to see collections of strange animals such as there would be at this funeral; and she had persuaded Sir James and the young Lady Chettam to drive the rector and herself to Lowick in order that the visit might be

altogether pleasant.

"I will go anywhere with you, Mrs. Cadwallader," Celia had said; "but I don't like funerals."

"Oh, my dear, when you have a clergyman in your family you must accommodate your tastes; I did that very early. When I married Humphrey I made up my mind to like sermons, and I set out by liking the end very much. That soon spread to the middle and the beginning because I couldn't have the end without them."

"No, to be sure not," said the dowager Lady Chettam with stately emphasis.

The upper window from which the funeral could be well seen was in the room occupied by Mr. Casaubon when he had been forbidden to work; but he had resumed nearly his habitual style of life now in spite of warnings and prescriptions, and after politely welcoming Mrs. Cadwallader, had slipped again into the library to chew a cud of erudite mistake about Cush and Mizraim.

But for her visitors, Dorothea too might have been shut up in the library, and would not have witnessed this scene of old Featherstone's funeral, which, aloof as it seemed to be from the tenor of her life, always afterwards came back to her at the touch of certain sensitive points in memory, just as the vision of St. Peter's at Rome was inwoven with moods of despondency. Scenes which make vital changes in our neighbours' lot are but the background of our own, yet, like a particular aspect of the fields and trees, they become associated for us with the epochs of our own history and make a part of that unity which lies in the selection of our keenest consciousness.

The dreamlike association of something alien and ill-understood with the deepest secrets of her experience seemed to mirror that sense of loneliness which was due to the very ardour of Dorothea's nature. The country gentry of old time lived in a rarefied social air; dotted apart on their stations up the mountain, they looked down with imperfect discrimination on the belts of thicker life below. And Dorothea was not at ease in the perspective and chilliness of that height.

"I shall not look any more," said Celia after the train had entered the church, placing herself a little behind her husband's elbow so that she could slyly touch his coat with her cheek. "I dare say Dodo likes it: she is fond of melancholy things and ugly people."

"I am fond of knowing something about the people I live among," said Dorothea, who had been watching everything with the interest of a monk on his holiday tour. "It seems to me we know nothing of our neighbours unless they are cottagers. One is constantly wondering what sort of lives other people lead and how they take things. I am quite obliged to Mrs. Cadwallader for coming and calling me out of the library."

"Quite right to feel obliged to me," said Mrs. Cadwallader. "Your rich Lowick farmers are as curious as any buffaloes or bisons, and I dare say you don't half see them at church. They are quite different from your uncle's tenants or Sir James's—monsters—farmers without landlords—one can't tell how to class them."

"Most of these followers are not Lowick people," said Sir James; "I suppose they are legatees from a distance, or from Middlemarch. Lovegood tells me the old fellow has left a good deal of money as well as land."

"Think of that now! When so many younger sons can't dine at their own expense," said Mrs. Cadwallader. "Ah," turning round at the sound of the opening door, "here is Mr. Brooke. I felt that we were incomplete before, and here is the explanation. You are come to see this odd funeral, of course?"

"No, I came to look after Casaubon—to see how he goes on, you know. And to bring a little news—a little news, my dear," said Mr. Brooke, nodding at Dorothea as she came towards him. "I looked into the library and I saw Casaubon over his books. I told him it wouldn't do; I said, 'This will never do, you know; think of your wife, Casaubon.' And he promised me to come up. I didn't tell him my news; I said he must come up."

"Ah, now they are coming out of church," Mrs. Cadwallader exclaimed. "Dear me, what a wonderfully mixed set! Mr. Lydgate as doctor, I suppose. But that is really a good-looking woman, and the fair young man must be her son. Who are they, Sir James, do you know?"

"I see Vincy, the mayor of Middlemarch; they are probably his wife and son," said Sir James, looking interrogatively at Mr. Brooke, who nodded and said, "Yes, a very decent family—a very good fellow is Vincy; a credit to the manufacturing interest. You have seen him at my house, you know."

"Ah, yes; one of your secret committee," said Mrs. Cadwallader provokingly.

"A coursing fellow, though," said Sir James with a fox-hunter's disgust.

"And one of those who suck the life out of the wretched handloom weavers in Tipton and Freshitt. That is how his family look so fair and sleek," said Mrs. Cadwallader. "Those dark, purple-faced people are an excellent foil. Dear me, they are like a set of jugs! Do look at Humphrey; one might fancy him an ugly archangel towering above them in his white surplice."

"It's a solemn thing, though, a funeral," said Mr. Brooke, "if you take it in that light, you know."

"But I am not taking it in that light. I can't wear my solemnity too often, else it will go to rags. It was time the old man died, and none of these people are sorry."

"How piteous!" said Dorothea. "This funeral seems to me the most dismal thing I ever saw. It is a blot on the morning. I cannot bear to think that anyone should die and leave no love behind."

She was going to say more, but she saw her husband enter and seat himself a little in the background. The difference his presence made to her was not always a happy one; she felt that he often inwardly objected to her speech.

"Positively," exclaimed Mrs. Cadwallader, "there is a new face come out from behind that broad man queerer than any of them: a little round head with bulging eyes—a sort of frog-face—do look. He must be of another blood, I think."

"Let me see!" said Celia with awakened curiosity, standing behind Mrs. Cadwallader and leaning forward over her head. "Oh, what an odd face!" Then with a quick change to another sort of surprised expression she added, "Why, Dodo, you never told me that Mr. Ladislaw was come again!"

Dorothea felt a shock of alarm; everyone noticed her sudden paleness as she looked up immediately at her uncle, while Mr. Casaubon looked at her.

"He came with me, you know; he is my guest—puts up with me at the Grange," said Mr. Brooke in his easiest tone, nodding at Dorothea as if the announcement were just what she might have expected. "And we have brought the picture at

the top of the carriage. I knew you would be pleased with the surprise, Casaubon. There you are to the very life—as Aquinas, you know. Quite the right sort of thing. And you will hear young Ladislaw talk about it. He talks uncommonly well—points out this, that, and the other—knows art and everything of that kind—companionable, you know—is up with you in any track—what I've been wanting a long while."

Mr. Casaubon bowed with cold politeness, mastering his irritation, but only so far as to be silent. He remembered Will's letter quite as well as Dorothea did; he had noticed that it was not among the letters which had been reserved for him on his recovery, and secretly concluding that Dorothea had sent word to Will not to come to Lowick, he had shrunk with proud sensitiveness from ever recurring to the subject. He now inferred that she had asked her uncle to invite Will to the Grange, and she felt it impossible at the moment to enter into any explanation.

Mrs. Cadwallader's eyes, diverted from the churchyard, saw a good deal of dumb show which was not so intelligible to her as she could have desired, and could not repress the question, "Who is Mr. Ladislaw?"

"A young relative of Mr. Casaubon's," said Sir James promptly. His good nature often made him quick and clear-seeing in personal matters, and he had divined from Dorothea's glance at her husband that there was some alarm in her mind.

"A very nice young fellow—Casaubon has done everything for him," explained Mr. Brooke. "He repays your expense in him, Casaubon," he went on, nodding encouragingly. "I hope he will stay with me a long while and we shall make something of my documents. I have plenty of ideas and facts, you know, and I can see he is just the man to put them into shape—remembers what the right quotations are, *omne tulit punctum*, and that sort of thing—gives subjects a kind of turn. I invited him some time ago when you were ill, Casaubon: Dorothea said you couldn't have anybody in the house, you know, and she asked me to write."

Poor Dorothea felt that every word of her uncle's was about as pleasant as a grain of sand in the eye to Mr. Casaubon. It would be altogether unfitting now to explain that she had not wished her uncle to invite Will Ladislaw. She could not in the least make clear to herself the reasons for her husband's dislike to his presence—a dislike painfully impressed on her by the scene in the library; but she felt the unbecomingness of saying anything that might convey a notion of it to others. Mr. Casaubon, indeed, had not thoroughly represented those mixed reasons to himself, irritated feeling with him, as with all of us, seeking rather for justification than for self-knowledge. But he wished to repress outward signs, and only Dorothea could discern the changes in her husband's face before he observed with more of dignified bending and sing-song than usual, "You are exceedingly hospitable, my dear sir; and I owe you acknowledgements for exercising your hospitality towards a relative of mine."

The funeral was ended now, and the churchyard was being cleared.

"Now you can see him, Mrs. Cadwallader," said Celia. "He is just like a miniature of Mr. Casaubon's aunt that hangs in Dorothea's boudoir—quite nice looking."

"A very pretty sprig," said Mrs. Cadwallader dryly. "What is your nephew to be, Mr. Casaubon?"

"Pardon me, he is not my nephew. He is my cousin."

"Well, you know," interposed Mr. Brooke, "he is trying his wings. He is just the sort of young fellow to rise. I should be glad to give him an opportunity. He would make a good secretary, now, like Hobbes, Milton, Swift—that sort of man."

"I understand," said Mrs. Cadwallader. "One who can write speeches."

"I'll fetch him in now, eh, Casaubon?" said Mr. Brooke. "He wouldn't come in till I had announced him, you know. And we'll go down and look at the picture. There you are to the life: a deep subtle sort of thinker with his forefinger on the page, while Saint Bonaventure or somebody else, rather fat and florid, is looking up at the Trinity. Everything is symbolical, you know—the higher style of art: I like that up to a certain point, but not too far—it's rather straining to keep up with, you know. But you are at home in that, Casaubon. And your painter's flesh is good—solidity, transparency, everything of that sort. I went into that a great deal at one time. However, I'll go and fetch Ladislaw."

CHAPTER 35

Non, je ne comprends pas de plus charmant plaisir
Que de voir d'héritiers une troupe affligée,
Le maintien interdit, et la mine allongée,
Lire un long testament où pales, étonnés,
On leur laisse un bonsoir avec un pied de nez.
Pour voir au naturel leur tristesse profonde,
Je reviendrais, je crois, exprès de l'autre monde.

—REGNARD: *Le Légataire Universel*

When the animals entered the ark in pairs, one may imagine that allied species made much private remark on each other and were tempted to think that so many forms feeding on the same store of fodder were eminently superfluous, as tending to diminish the rations. (I fear the part played by the vultures on that occasion would be too painful for art to represent, those birds being disadvantageously naked about the gullet and apparently without rites and ceremonies.)

The same sort of temptation befell the Christian carnivora who formed Peter Featherstone's funeral procession, most of them having their minds bent on a limited store which each would have liked to get the most of. The long-recognized blood-relations and connexions by marriage made already a goodly number, which, multiplied by possibilities, presented a fine range for jealous conjecture and pathetic hopefulness. Jealousy of the Vincys had created a fellowship in hostility among all persons of the Featherstone blood, so that in the absence of any decided indication that one of themselves was to have more than the rest, the dread lest that long-legged Fred Vincy should have the land was necessarily dominant, though it left abundant feeling and leisure for vaguer jealousies, such as were entertained towards Mary Garth. Solomon found time to reflect that Jonah was undeserving, and Jonah to abuse Solomon as greedy; Jane, the elder sister, held that Martha's children ought not to expect so much as the young Waules; and Martha, more lax on the subject of primogeniture, was sorry to think that Jane was so "having." These nearest of kin were naturally impressed with the unreasonableness of expectations in cousins and second cousins and used their arithmetic in reckoning the large sums that small legacies might mount to if there were too many of them. Two cousins were present to hear the will, and a second cousin besides Mr. Trumbull. This second cousin was a Middlemarch mercer of polite manners and superfluous aspirates. The two cousins were elderly men from Brassing, one of them conscious of claims on the score of inconvenient expense sustained by him in presents of oysters and other eatables to his rich cousin Peter, the other entirely saturnine, leaning his hands and chin on a stick and conscious of claims based on no narrow performance but on merit generally: both blameless citizens of Brassing who wished that Jonah Featherstone did not live there. The wit of a family is usually best received among strangers.

"Why, Trumbull himself is pretty sure of five hundred—*that* you may depend—I shouldn't wonder if my brother promised him," said Solomon, musing aloud with his sisters the evening before the funeral.

"Dear, dear!" said poor sister Martha, whose imagination of hundreds had been habitually narrowed to the amount of her unpaid rent.

But in the morning all the ordinary currents of conjecture were disturbed by the presence of a strange mourner who had plashed among them as if from the moon. This was the stranger described by Mrs. Cadwallader as frog-faced: a man perhaps about two or three and thirty, whose prominent eyes, thin-lipped, downward-curved mouth, and hair sleekly brushed away from a forehead that sank suddenly above the ridge of the eyebrows certainly gave his face a batrachian unchangeableness of expression. Here, clearly, was a new legatee; else why was he bidden as a mourner? Here were new possibilities, raising a new uncertainty, which almost checked remark in the mourning-coaches. We are all humiliated by the sudden discovery of a fact which has existed very comfortably and perhaps been staring at us in private while we have been making up our world entirely without it. No one had seen this questionable stranger before except Mary Garth, and she knew nothing more of him than that he had twice been to Stone Court when Mr. Featherstone was downstairs and had sat alone with him for several hours. She had found an opportunity of mentioning this to her father, and perhaps Caleb's were the only eyes except the lawyer's which examined the stranger with more of inquiry than of disgust or suspicion. Caleb Garth, having little expectation and less cupidity, was interested in the verification of his own guesses, and the calmness with which he half smilingly rubbed his chin and shot intelligent glances much as if he were valuing a tree made a fine contrast with the alarm or scorn visible in other faces when the unknown mourner, whose name was understood to be Rigg, entered the wainscoted parlour and took his seat near the door to make part of the audience when the will should be read. Just then Mr. Solomon and Mr. Jonah were gone upstairs with the lawyer to search for the will, and Mrs. Waule, seeing two vacant seats between herself and Mr. Borthrop Trumbull, had the spirit to move next to that great authority, who was handling his watch-seals and trimming his outlines with a determination not to show anything so compromising to a man of ability as wonder or surprise.

"I suppose you know everything about what my poor brother's done, Mr. Trumbull," said Mrs. Waule in the lowest of her woolly tones, while she turned her crape-shadowed bonnet towards Mr. Trumbull's ear.

"My good lady, whatever was told me was told in confidence," said the auctioneer, putting his hand up to screen that secret.

"Them who've made sure of their good luck may be disappointed yet," Mrs. Waule continued, finding some relief in this

communication.

"Hopes are often delusive," said Mr. Trumbull, still in confidence.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Waule, looking across at the Vincys and then moving back to the side of her sister Martha.

"It's wonderful how close poor Peter was," she said in the same undertones. "We none of us know what he might have had on his mind. I only hope and trust he wasn't a worse liver than we think of, Martha."

Poor Mrs. Cranch was bulky, and breathing asthmatically, had the additional motive for making her remarks unexceptionable and giving them a general bearing, that even her whispers were loud and liable to sudden bursts like those of a deranged barrel-organ.

"I never *was* covetous, Jane," she replied; "but I have six children and have buried three, and I didn't marry into money. The eldest, that sits there, is but nineteen—so I leave you to guess. And stock always short, and land most awkward. But if ever I've begged and prayed, it's been to God above; though where there's one brother a bachelor and the other childless after twice marrying—anybody might think!"

Meanwhile, Mr. Vincy had glanced at the passive face of Mr. Rigg and had taken out his snuff-box and tapped it, but had put it back again unopened as an indulgence which, however clarifying to the judgement, was unsuited to the occasion. "I shouldn't wonder if Featherstone had better feelings than any of us gave him credit for," he observed in the ear of his wife. "This funeral shows a thought about everybody; it looks well when a man wants to be followed by his friends, and if they are humble, not to be ashamed of them. I should be all the better pleased if he'd left lots of small legacies. They may be uncommonly useful to fellows in a small way."

"Everything is as handsome as could be, crape and silk and everything," said Mrs. Vincy contentedly.

But I am sorry to say that Fred was under some difficulty in repressing a laugh, which would have been more unsuitable than his father's snuff-box. Fred had overheard Mr. Jonah suggesting something about a "love-child," and with this thought in his mind, the stranger's face, which happened to be opposite him, affected him too ludicrously. Mary Garth, discerning his distress in the twitchings of his mouth and his recourse to a cough, came cleverly to his rescue by asking him to change seats with her so that he got into a shadowy corner. Fred was feeling as good-naturedly as possible towards everybody, including Rigg; and having some relenting towards all these people who were less lucky than he was aware of being himself, he would not for the world have behaved amiss; still, it was particularly easy to laugh.

But the entrance of the lawyer and the two brothers drew everyone's attention.

The lawyer was Mr. Standish, and he had come to Stone Court this morning believing that he knew thoroughly well who would be pleased and who disappointed before the day was over. The will he expected to read was the last of three which he had drawn up for Mr. Featherstone. Mr. Standish was not a man who varied his manners; he behaved with the same deep-voiced, offhand civility to everybody, as if he saw no difference in them, and talked chiefly of the hay crop, which would be "very fine, by God!," of the last bulletins concerning the king, and of the duke of Clarence, who was a sailor every inch of him, and just the man to rule over an island like Britain.

Old Featherstone had often reflected as he sat looking at the fire that Standish would be surprised some day; it is true that if he had done as he liked at the last and burnt the will drawn up by another lawyer, he would not have secured that minor end; still he had had his pleasure in ruminating on it. And certainly Mr. Standish was surprised, but not at all sorry; on the contrary, he rather enjoyed the zest of a little curiosity in his own mind, which the discovery of a second will added to the prospective amazement on the part of the Featherstone family.

As to the sentiments of Solomon and Jonah, they were held in utter suspense: it seemed to them that the old will would have a certain validity and that there might be such an interlacement of poor Peter's former and latter intentions as to create endless "lawing" before anybody came by their own—an inconvenience which would have at least the advantage of going all round. Hence the brothers showed a thoroughly neutral gravity as they re-entered with Mr. Standish; but Solomon took out his white handkerchief again with a sense that in any case there would be affecting passages, and crying at funerals, however dry, was customarily served up in lawn.

Perhaps the person who felt the most throbbing excitement at this moment was Mary Garth, in the consciousness that it was she who had virtually determined the production of this second will, which might have momentous effects on the lot of some persons present. No soul except herself knew what had passed on that final night.

"The will I hold in my hand," said Mr. Standish, who, seated at the table in the middle of the room, took his time about everything, including the coughs with which he showed a disposition to clear his voice, "was drawn up by myself and executed by our deceased friend on the 9th of August, 1825. But I find that there is a subsequent instrument hitherto unknown to me, bearing date the 20th of July, 1826, hardly a year later than the previous one. And there is farther, I see"—Mr. Standish was cautiously travelling over the document with his spectacles—"a codicil to this latter will, bearing date March the first, 1828."

"Dear, dear!" said sister Martha, not meaning to be audible, but driven to some articulation under this pressure of dates.

"I shall begin by reading the earlier will," continued Mr. Standish, "since such, as appears by his not having destroyed the document, was the intention of deceased."

The preamble was felt to be rather long, and several besides Solomon shook their heads pathetically, looking on the ground; all eyes avoided meeting other eyes and were chiefly fixed either on the spots in the tablecloth or on Mr. Standish's bald head, excepting Mary Garth's. When all the rest were trying to look nowhere in particular, it was safe for her to look at them. And at the sound of the first "give and bequeath" she could see all complexions changing subtly as if some faint vibration were passing through them, save that of Mr. Rigg. He sat in unaltered calm, and, in fact, the company, preoccupied with more important problems and with the complication of listening to bequests which might or might not be revoked, had ceased to think of him. Fred blushed, and Mr. Vincy found it impossible to do without his snuff-box in his hand, though he kept it closed.

The small bequests came first, and even the recollection that there was another will and that poor Peter might have thought better of it could not quell the rising disgust and indignation. One likes to be done well by in every tense, past, present, and future. And here was Peter capable five years ago of leaving only two hundred apiece to his own brothers and

sisters and only a hundred apiece to his own nephews and nieces; the Garths were not mentioned, but Mrs. Vincy and Rosamond were each to have a hundred. Mr. Trumbull was to have the gold-headed cane and fifty pounds; the other second cousins and the cousins present were each to have the like handsome sum, which, as the saturnine cousin observed, was a sort of legacy that left a man nowhere; and there was much more of such offensive dribbling in favour of persons not present, problematical, and it was to be feared, low connexions. Altogether, reckoning hastily, here were about three thousand disposed of. Where then had Peter meant the rest of the money to go—and where the land? And what was revoked and what not revoked—and was the revocation for better or for worse? All emotion must be conditional, and might turn out to be the wrong thing. The men were strong enough to bear up and keep quiet under this confused suspense, some letting their lower lip fall, others pursing it up, according to the habit of their muscles. But Jane and Martha sank under the rush of questions and began to cry, poor Mrs. Cranch being half moved with the consolation of getting any hundreds at all without working for them and half aware that her share was scanty, whereas Mrs. Waule's mind was entirely flooded with the sense of being an own sister and getting little, while somebody else was to have much. The general expectation now was that the "much" would fall to Fred Vincy, but the Vincys themselves were surprised when ten thousand pounds in specified investments were declared to be bequeathed to him—was the land coming too? Fred bit his lips; it was difficult to help smiling, and Mrs. Vincy felt herself the happiest of women, possible revocation shrinking out of sight in this dazzling vision.

There was still a residue of personal property as well as the land, but the whole was left to one person, and that person was—O possibilities! O expectations founded on the favour of "close" old gentlemen! O endless vocatives that would still leave expression slipping helpless from the measurement of mortal folly!—that residuary legatee was Joshua Rigg, who was also sole executor and who was to take thenceforth the name of Featherstone.

There was a rustling which seemed like a shudder running round the room. Everyone stared afresh at Mr. Rigg, who apparently experienced no surprise.

"A most singular testamentary disposition!" exclaimed Mr. Trumbull, preferring for once that he should be considered ignorant in the past. "But there is a second will—there is a further document. We have not yet heard the final wishes of the deceased."

Mary Garth was feeling that what they had yet to hear were not the final wishes. The second will revoked everything except the legacies to the low persons before mentioned (some alterations in these being the occasion of the codicil), and the bequest of all the land lying in Lowick parish, with all the stock and household furniture, to Joshua Rigg. The residue of the property was to be devoted to the erection and endowment of almshouses for old men, to be called Featherstone's Almshouses and to be built on a piece of land near Middlemarch already bought for the purpose by the testator, he wishing —so the document declared—to please God Almighty. Nobody present had a farthing, but Mr. Trumbull had the gold-headed cane. It took some time for the company to recover the power of expression. Mary dared not look at Fred.

Mr. Vincy was the first to speak—after using his snuff-box energetically—and he spoke with loud indignation. "The most unaccountable will I ever heard! I should say he was not in his right mind when he made it. I should say this last will was void," added Mr. Vincy, feeling that this expression put the thing in the true light. "Eh, Standish?"

"Our deceased friend always knew what he was about, I think," said Mr. Standish. "Everything is quite regular. Here is a letter from Clemmens of Brassing tied with the will. He drew it up. A very respectable solicitor."

"I never noticed any alienation of mind—any aberration of intellect in the late Mr. Featherstone," said Borthrop Trumbull, "but I call this will eccentric. I was always willingly of service to the old soul, and he intimated pretty plainly a sense of obligation which would show itself in his will. The gold-headed cane is farcical considered as an acknowledgement to me, but happily I am above mercenary considerations."

"There's nothing very surprising in the matter that I can see," said Caleb Garth. "Anybody might have had more reason for wondering if the will had been what you might expect from an open-minded, straightforward man. For my part, I wish there was no such thing as a will."

"That's a strange sentiment to come from a Christian man, by God!" said the lawyer. "I should like to know how you will back that up, Garth!"

"Oh," said Caleb, leaning forward, adjusting his finger-tips with nicety, and looking meditatively on the ground. It always seemed to him that words were the hardest part of "business."

But here Mr. Jonah Featherstone made himself heard. "Well, he always was a fine hypocrite, was my brother Peter. But this will cuts out everything. If I'd known, a waggon and six horses shouldn't have drawn me from Brassing. I'll put a white hat and drab coat on tomorrow."

"Dear, dear," wept Mrs. Cranch, "and we've been at the expense of travelling, and that poor lad sitting idle here so long! It's the first time I ever heard my brother Peter was so wishful to please God Almighty, but if I was to be struck helpless I must say it's hard—I can think no other."

"It'll do him no good where he's gone, that's my belief," said Solomon with a bitterness which was remarkably genuine, though his tone could not help being sly. "Peter was a bad liver, and almshouses won't cover it, when he's had the impudence to show it at the last."

"And all the while had got his own lawful family—brothers and sisters and nephews and nieces—and has sat in church with 'em whenever he thought well to come," said Mrs. Waule. "And might have left his property so respectable to them that's never been used to extravagance or unsteadiness in no manner of way—and not so poor but what they could have saved every penny and made more of it. And me—the trouble I've been at, times and times, to come here and be sisterly—and him with things on his mind all the while that might make anybody's flesh creep. But if the Almighty's allowed it, He means to punish him for it. Brother Solomon, I shall be going, if you'll drive me."

"I've no desire to put my foot on the premises again," said Solomon. "I've got land of my own and property of my own to will away."

"It's a poor tale how luck goes in the world," said Jonah. "It never answers to have a bit of spirit in you. You'd better be a dog in the manger. But those above ground might learn a lesson. One fool's will is enough in a family."

“There’s more ways than one of being a fool,” said Solomon. “I shan’t leave my money to be poured down the sink, and I shan’t leave it to fondlings from Africay. I like Featherstones that were brewed such, and not turned Featherstones with sticking the name on ’em.”

Solomon addressed these remarks in a loud aside to Mrs. Waule as he rose to accompany her. Brother Jonah felt himself capable of much more stinging wit than this, but he reflected that there was no use in offending the new proprietor of Stone Court until you were certain that he was quite without intentions of hospitality towards witty men whose name he was about to bear.

Mr. Joshua Rigg, in fact, appeared to trouble himself little about any innuendoes, but showed a notable change of manner, walking coolly up to Mr. Standish and putting business questions with much coolness. He had a high, chirping voice and a vile accent. Fred, whom he no longer moved to laughter, thought him the lowest monster he had ever seen. But Fred was feeling rather sick. The Middlemarch mercer waited for an opportunity of engaging Mr. Rigg in conversation; there was no knowing how many pairs of legs the new proprietor might require hose for, and profits were more to be relied on than legacies. Also, the mercer, as a second cousin, was dispassionate enough to feel curiosity.

Mr. Vincy, after his one outburst, had remained proudly silent, though too much preoccupied with unpleasant feelings to think of moving till he observed that his wife had gone to Fred’s side and was crying silently while she held her darling’s hand. He rose immediately, and turning his back on the company while he said to her in an undertone, “Don’t give way, Lucy; don’t make a fool of yourself, my dear, before these people,” he added in his usual loud voice, “Go and order the phaeton, Fred; I have no time to waste.”

Mary Garth had before this been getting ready to go home with her father. She met Fred in the hall and now for the first time had the courage to look at him. He had that withered sort of paleness which will sometimes come on young faces, and his hand was very cold when she shook it. Mary too was agitated; she was conscious that fatally, without will of her own, she had perhaps made a great difference to Fred’s lot.

“Good-bye,” she said with affectionate sadness. “Be brave, Fred. I do believe you are better without the money. What was the good of it to Mr. Featherstone?”

“That’s all very fine,” said Fred pettishly. “What is a fellow to do? I *must* go into the Church now.” (He knew that this would vex Mary: very well; then she must tell him what else he could do.) “And I thought I should be able to pay your father at once and make everything right. And you have not even a hundred pounds left you. What shall you do now, Mary?”

“Take another situation, of course, as soon as I can get one. My father has enough to do to keep the rest, without me. Good-bye.”

In a very short time Stone Court was cleared of well-brewed Featherstones and other long-accustomed visitors. Another stranger had been brought to settle in the neighbourhood of Middlemarch, but in the case of Mr. Rigg Featherstone there was more discontent with immediate visible consequences than speculation as to the effect which his presence might have in the future. No soul was prophetic enough to have any foreboding as to what might appear on the trail of Joshua Rigg.

And here I am naturally led to reflect on the means of elevating a low subject. Historical parallels are remarkably efficient in this way. The chief objection to them is that the diligent narrator may lack space or (what is often the same thing) may not be able to think of them with any degree of particularity, though he may have a philosophical confidence that if known they would be illustrative. It seems an easier and shorter way to dignity to observe that—since there never was a true story which could not be told in parables where you might put a monkey for a margrave, and vice versa—whatever has been or is to be narrated by me about low people may be ennobled by being considered a parable, so that if any bad habits and ugly consequences are brought into view, the reader may have the relief of regarding them as not more than figuratively ungenteel and may feel himself virtually in company with persons of some style. Thus while I tell the truth about loobies, my reader’s imagination need not be entirely excluded from an occupation with lords; and the petty sums which any bankrupt of high standing would be sorry to retire upon may be lifted to the level of high commercial transactions by the inexpensive addition of proportional ciphers.

As to any provincial history in which the agents are all of high moral rank, that must be of a date long posterior to the first Reform Bill, and Peter Featherstone, you perceive, was dead and buried some months before Lord Grey came into office.

CHAPTER 36

'Tis strange to see the humours of these men,
These great aspiring spirits, that should be wise:
. . . . . .
For being the nature of great spirits to love
To be where they may be most eminent;
They, rating of themselves so farre above
Us in conceit, with whom they do frequent,
Imagine how we wonder and esteeme
All that they do or say; which makes them strive
To make our admiration more extreme,
Which they suppose they cannot, 'less they give
Notice of their extreme and highest thoughts.

—DANIEL: *Tragedy of Philotas*

Mr. Vincy went home from the reading of the will with his point of view considerably changed in relation to many subjects. He was an open-minded man, but given to indirect modes of expressing himself: when he was disappointed in a market for his silk braids, he swore at the groom; when his brother-in-law Bulstrode had vexed him, he made cutting remarks on Methodism; and it was now apparent that he regarded Fred's idleness with a sudden increase of severity by his throwing an embroidered cap out of the smoking-room on to the hall floor.

"Well, sir," he observed when that young gentleman was moving off to bed, "I hope you've made up your mind now to go up next term and pass your examination. I've taken my resolution, so I advise you to lose no time in taking yours."

Fred made no answer: he was too utterly depressed. (Twenty-four hours ago he had thought that instead of needing to know what he should do, he should by this time know that he needed to do nothing, that he should hunt in pink, have a first-rate hunter, ride to cover on a fine hack, and be generally respected for doing so; moreover, that he should be able at once to pay Mr. Garth, and that Mary could no longer have any reason for not marrying him.) And all this was to have come without study or other inconvenience, purely by the favour of Providence in the shape of an old gentleman's caprice. But now, at the end of the twenty-four hours, all those firm expectations were upset. It was "rather hard lines" that while he was smarting under this disappointment he should be treated as if he could have helped it. But he went away silently, and his mother pleaded for him.

"Don't be hard on the poor boy, Vincy. He'll turn out well yet, though that wicked man has deceived him. I feel as sure as I sit here, Fred will turn out well—else why was he brought back from the brink of the grave? And I call it a robbery: it was like giving him the land, to promise it; and what is promising, if making everybody believe is not promising? And you see he did leave him ten thousand pounds, and then took it away again."

"Took it away again!" said Mr. Vincy pettishly. "I tell you the lad's an unlucky lad, Lucy. And you've always spoiled him."

"Well, Vincy, he was my first, and you made a fine fuss with him when he came. You were as proud as proud," said Mrs. Vincy, easily recovering her cheerful smile.

"Who knows what babies will turn to? I was fool enough, I dare say," said the husband, more mildly, however.

"But who has handsomer, better children than ours? Fred is far beyond other people's sons; you may hear it in his speech that he has kept college company. And Rosamond—where is there a girl like her? She might stand beside any lady in the land, and only look the better for it. You see—Mr. Lydgate has kept the highest company and been everywhere, and he fell in love with her at once. Not but what I could have wished Rosamond had not engaged herself. She might have met somebody on a visit who would have been a far better match; I mean at her schoolfellow Miss Willoughby's. There are relations in that family quite as high as Mr. Lydgate's."

"Damn relations!" said Mr. Vincy. "I've had enough of them. I don't want a son-in-law who has got nothing but his relations to recommend him."

"Why, my dear," said Mrs. Vincy, "you seemed as pleased as could be about it. It's true, I wasn't at home; but Rosamond told me you hadn't a word to say against the engagement. And she has begun to buy in the best linen and cambric for her underclothing."

"Not by my will," said Mr. Vincy. "I shall have enough to do this year, with an idle scamp of a son, without paying for wedding-clothes. The times are as tight as can be; everybody is being ruined; and I don't believe Lydgate has got a farthing. I shan't give my consent to their marrying. Let 'em wait, as their elders have done before 'em."

"Rosamond will take it hard, Vincy, and you know you never could bear to cross her."

"Yes, I could. The sooner the engagement's off, the better. I don't believe he'll ever make an income, the way he goes on. He makes enemies; that's all I hear of his making."

"But he stands very high with Mr. Bulstrode, my dear. The marriage would please *him*, I should think."

"Please the deuce!" said Mr. Vincy. "Bulstrode won't pay for their keep. And if Lydgate thinks I'm going to give money for them to set up housekeeping, he's mistaken, that's all. I expect I shall have to put down my horses soon. You'd better tell Rosy what I say."

This was a not infrequent procedure with Mr. Vincy—to be rash in jovial assent, and on becoming subsequently conscious that he had been rash, to employ others in making the offensive retractation. However, Mrs. Vincy, who never willingly opposed her husband, lost no time the next morning in letting Rosamond know what he had said. Rosamond, examining some muslin-work, listened in silence, and at the end gave a certain turn of her graceful neck, of which only long experience could teach you that it meant perfect obstinacy.

"What do you say, my dear?" said her mother with affectionate deference.

"Papa does not mean anything of the kind," said Rosamond quite calmly. "He has always said that he wished me to marry the man I loved. And I shall marry Mr. Lydgate. It is seven weeks now since Papa gave his consent. And I hope we shall have Mrs. Bretton's house."

"Well, my dear, I shall leave you to manage your papa. You always do manage everybody. But if we ever do go and get damask, Sadler's is the place—far better than Hopkins'. Mrs. Bretton's is very large, though; I should love you to have such a house, but it will take a great deal of furniture—carpeting and everything, besides plate and glass. And you hear, your papa says he will give no money. Do you think Mr. Lydgate expects it?"

"You cannot imagine that I should ask him, Mamma. Of course he understands his own affairs."

"But he may have been looking for money, my dear, and we all thought of your having a pretty legacy as well as Fred; and now everything is so dreadful; there's no pleasure in thinking of anything, with that poor boy disappointed as he is."

"That has nothing to do with my marriage, Mamma. Fred must leave off being idle. I am going upstairs to take this work to Miss Morgan; she does the open-hemming very well. Mary Garth might do some work for me now, I should think. Her sewing is exquisite; it is the nicest thing I know about Mary. I should so like to have all my cambric frilling double-hemmed. And it takes a long time."

Mrs. Vincy's belief that Rosamond could manage her papa was well founded. Apart from his dinners and his coursing, Mr. Vincy, blustering as he was, had as little of his own way as if he had been a prime minister: the force of circumstances was easily too much for him, as it is for most pleasure-loving florid men, and the circumstance called Rosamond was particularly forcible by means of that mild persistence which, as we know, enables a white, soft, living substance to make its way in spite of opposing rock. Papa was not a rock: he had no other fixity than that fixity of alternating impulses sometimes called habit, and this was altogether unfavourable to his taking the only decisive line of conduct in relation to his daughter's engagement—namely, to inquire thoroughly into Lydgate's circumstances, declare his own inability to furnish money, and forbid alike either a speedy marriage or an engagement which must be too lengthy. That seems very simple and easy in the statement, but a disagreeable resolve formed in the chill hours of the morning had as many conditions against it as the early frost and rarely persisted under the warming influences of the day. The indirect though emphatic expression of opinion to which Mr. Vincy was prone suffered much restraint in this case; Lydgate was a proud man towards whom innuendoes were obviously unsafe, and throwing his hat on the floor was out of the question. Mr. Vincy was a little in awe of him, a little vain that he wanted to marry Rosamond, a little indisposed to raise a question of money in which his own position was not advantageous, a little afraid of being worsted in dialogue with a man better educated and more highly bred than himself, and a little afraid of doing what his daughter would not like. The part Mr. Vincy preferred playing was that of the generous host whom nobody criticizes. In the earlier half of the day there was business to hinder any formal communication of an adverse resolve; in the later there was dinner, wine, whist, and general satisfaction. And in the meanwhile the hours were each leaving their little deposit and gradually forming the final reason for inaction, namely, that action was too late.

The accepted lover spent most of his evenings in Lowick Gate, and a love-making not at all dependent on money-advances from fathers-in-law or prospective income from a profession went on flourishingly under Mr. Vincy's own eyes. Young love-making—that gossamer web! Even the points it clings to—the things whence its subtle interfacings are swung—are scarcely perceptible: momentary touches of finger-tips, meetings of rays from blue and dark orbs, unfinished phrases, lightest changes of cheek and lip, faintest tremors. The web itself is made of spontaneous beliefs and indefinable joys, yearnings of one life towards another, visions of completeness, indefinite trust. And Lydgate fell to spinning that web from his inward self with wonderful rapidity in spite of experience supposed to be finished off with the drama of Laure—in spite too of medicine and biology, for the inspection of macerated muscle or of eyes presented in a dish (like Santa Lucia's) and other incidents of scientific inquiry are observed to be less incompatible with poetic love than a native dullness or a lively addiction to the lowest prose. As for Rosamond, she was in the water-lily's expanding wonderment at its own fuller life, and she too was spinning industriously at the mutual web. All this went on in the corner of the drawing-room where the piano stood, and subtle as it was, the light made it a sort of rainbow visible to many observers besides Mr. Farebrother. The certainty that Miss Vincy and Mr. Lydgate were engaged became general in Middlemarch without the aid of formal announcement.

Aunt Bulstrode was again stirred to anxiety, but this time she addressed herself to her brother, going to the warehouse expressly to avoid Mrs. Vincy's volatility. His replies were not satisfactory.

"Walter, you never mean to tell me that you have allowed all this to go on without inquiry into Mr. Lydgate's prospects?" said Mrs. Bulstrode, opening her eyes with wider gravity at her brother, who was in his peevish warehouse humour. "Think of this girl brought up in luxury—in too worldly a way, I am sorry to say—what will she do on a small income?"

"Oh, confound it, Harriet! What can I do when men come into the town without any asking of mine? Did you shut your house up against Lydgate? Bulstrode has pushed him forward more than anybody. I never made any fuss about the young fellow. You should go and talk to your husband about it, not me."

"Well, really, Walter, how can Mr. Bulstrode be to blame? I am sure he did not wish for the engagement."

"Oh, if Bulstrode had not taken him by the hand, I should never have invited him."

"But you called him in to attend on Fred, and I am sure that was a mercy," said Mrs. Bulstrode, losing her clue in the intricacies of the subject.

"I don't know about mercy," said Mr. Vincy testily. "I know I am worried more than I like with my family. I was a good

brother to you, Harriet, before you married Bulstrode, and I must say he doesn't always show that friendly spirit towards your family that might have been expected of him." Mr. Vincy was very little like a Jesuit, but no accomplished Jesuit could have turned a question more adroitly. Harriet had to defend her husband instead of blaming her brother, and the conversation ended at a point as far from the beginning as some recent sparring between the brothers-in-law at a vestry meeting.

Mrs. Bulstrode did not repeat her brother's complaints to her husband, but in the evening she spoke to him of Lydgate and Rosamond. He did not share her warm interest, however, and only spoke with resignation of the risks attendant on the beginning of medical practice and the desirability of prudence.

"I am sure we are bound to pray for that thoughtless girl—brought up as she has been," said Mrs. Bulstrode, wishing to rouse her husband's feelings.

"Truly, my dear," said Mr. Bulstrode assentingly. "Those who are not of this world can do little else to arrest the errors of the obstinately worldly. That is what we must accustom ourselves to recognize with regard to your brother's family. I could have wished that Mr. Lydgate had not entered into such a union, but my relations with him are limited to that use of his gifts for God's purposes which is taught us by the Divine government under each dispensation."

Mrs. Bulstrode said no more, attributing some dissatisfaction which she felt to her own want of spirituality. She believed that her husband was one of those men whose memoirs should be written when they died.

As to Lydgate himself, having been accepted, he was prepared to accept all the consequences which he believed himself to foresee with perfect clearness. Of course he must be married in a year—perhaps even in half a year. This was not what he had intended, but other schemes would not be hindered; they would simply adjust themselves anew. Marriage, of course, must be prepared for in the usual way. A house must be taken instead of the rooms he at present occupied; and Lydgate, having heard Rosamond speak with admiration of old Mrs. Bretton's house (situated in Lowick Gate), took notice when it fell vacant after the old lady's death and immediately entered into treaty for it.

He did this in an episodic way, very much as he gave orders to his tailor for every requisite of perfect dress, without any notion of being extravagant. On the contrary, he would have despised any ostentation of expense; his profession had familiarized him with all grades of poverty, and he cared much for those who suffered hardships. He would have behaved perfectly at a table where the sauce was served in a jug with the handle off, he would have remembered nothing about a grand dinner except that a man was there who talked well. But it had never occurred to him that he should live in any other than what he would have called an ordinary way, with green glasses for hock and excellent waiting at table. In warming himself at French social theories he had brought away no smell of scorching. We may handle even extreme opinions with impunity while our furniture, our dinner giving, and preference for armorial bearings in our own case link us indissolubly with the established order. And Lydgate's tendency was not towards extreme opinions; he would have liked no barefooted doctrines, being particular about his boots; he was no radical in relation to anything but medical reform and the prosecution of discovery. In the rest of practical life he walked by hereditary habit, half from that personal pride and unreflecting egoism which I have already called commonness and half from that naïveté which belonged to preoccupation with favourite ideas.

Any inward debate Lydgate had as to the consequences of this engagement which had stolen upon him turned on the paucity of time rather than of money. Certainly, being in love and being expected continually by someone who always turned out to be prettier than memory could represent her to be did interfere with the diligent use of spare hours which might serve some "plodding fellow of a German" to make the great, imminent discovery. This was really an argument for not deferring the marriage too long, as he implied to Mr. Farebrother one day that the vicar came to his room with some pond-products which he wanted to examine under a better microscope than his own, and finding Lydgate's tableful of apparatus and specimens in confusion, said sarcastically, "Eros has degenerated; he began by introducing order and harmony, and now he brings back chaos."

"Yes, at some stages," said Lydgate, lifting his brows and smiling, while he began to arrange his microscope. "But a better order will begin after."

"Soon?" said the vicar.

"I hope so, really. This unsettled state of affairs uses up the time, and when one has notions in science, every moment is an opportunity. I feel sure that marriage must be the best thing for a man who wants to work steadily. He has everything at home then—no teasing with personal speculation—he can get calmness and freedom."

"You are an enviable dog," said the vicar, "to have such a prospect—Rosamond, calmness, and freedom, all to your share. Here am I with nothing but my pipe and pond animalcules. Now, are you ready?"

Lydgate did not mention to the vicar another reason he had for wishing to shorten the period of courtship. It was rather irritating to him, even with the wine of love in his veins, to be obliged to mingle so often with the family party at the Vincys' and to enter so much into Middlemarch gossip, protracted good cheer, whist-playing, and general futility. He had to be deferential when Mr. Vincy decided questions with trenchant ignorance, especially as to those liquors which were the best inward pickle, preserving you from the effects of bad air. Mrs. Vincy's openness and simplicity were quite unstreaked with suspicion as to the subtle offence she might give to the taste of her intended son-in-law; and altogether Lydgate had to confess to himself that he was descending a little in relation to Rosamond's family. But that exquisite creature herself suffered in the same sort of way: it was at least one delightful thought that in marrying her he could give her a much-needed transplantation.

"Dear!" he said to her one evening in his gentlest tone as he sat down by her and looked closely at her face—

But I must first say that he had found her alone in the drawing-room, where the great old-fashioned window, almost as large as the side of the room, was opened to the summer scents of the garden at the back of the house. Her father and mother were gone to a party, and the rest were all out with the butterflies.

"Dear! Your eyelids are red."

"Are they?" said Rosamond. "I wonder why." It was not in her nature to pour forth wishes or grievances. They only came forth gracefully on solicitation.

“As if you could hide it from me!” said Lydgate, laying his hand tenderly on both of hers. “Don’t I see a tiny drop on one of the lashes? Things trouble you, and you don’t tell me. That is unloving.”

“Why should I tell you what you cannot alter? They are everyday things; perhaps they have been a little worse lately.”

“Family annoyances. Don’t fear speaking. I guess them.”

“Papa has been more irritable lately. Fred makes him angry, and this morning there was a fresh quarrel because Fred threatens to throw his whole education away and do something quite beneath him. And besides—”

Rosamond hesitated, and her cheeks were gathering a slight flush. Lydgate had never seen her in trouble since the morning of their engagement, and he had never felt so passionately towards her as at this moment. He kissed the hesitating lips gently as if to encourage them.

“I feel that Papa is not quite pleased about our engagement,” Rosamond continued almost in a whisper; “and he said last night that he should certainly speak to you and say it must be given up.”

“Will you give it up?” said Lydgate with quick energy—almost angrily.

“I never give up anything that I choose to do,” said Rosamond, recovering her calmness at the touching of this cord.

“God bless you!” said Lydgate, kissing her again. This constancy of purpose in the right place was adorable. He went on, “It is too late now for your father to say that our engagement must be given up. You are of age, and I claim you as mine. If anything is done to make you unhappy—that is a reason for hastening our marriage.”

An unmistakable delight shone forth from the blue eyes that met his, and the radiance seemed to light up all his future with mild sunshine. Ideal happiness (of the kind known in the Arabian Nights, in which you are invited to step from the labour and discord of the street into a paradise where everything is given to you and nothing claimed) seemed to be an affair of a few weeks’ waiting, more or less.

“Why should we defer it?” he said with ardent insistence. “I have taken the house now; everything else can soon be got ready—can it not? You will not mind about new clothes. Those can be bought afterwards.”

“What original notions you clever men have!” said Rosamond, dimpling with more thorough laughter than usual at this humorous incongruity. “This is the first time I ever heard of wedding-clothes being bought after marriage.”

“But you don’t mean to say you would insist on my waiting months for the sake of clothes?” said Lydgate, half thinking that Rosamond was tormenting him prettily and half fearing that she really shrank from speedy marriage. “Remember, we are looking forward to a better sort of happiness even than this—being continually together, independent of others, and ordering our lives as we will. Come, dear, tell me how soon you can be altogether mine.”

There was a serious pleading in Lydgate’s tone, as if he felt that she would be injuring him by any fantastic delays. Rosamond became serious too, and slightly meditative; in fact, she was going through many intricacies of lace-edging and hosiery and petticoat-tucking in order to give an answer that would at least be approximative.

“Six weeks would be ample—say so, Rosamond,” insisted Lydgate, releasing her hands to put his arm gently round her.

One little hand immediately went to pat her hair, while she gave her neck a meditative turn, and then said seriously, “There would be the house-linen and the furniture to be prepared. Still, Mamma could see to those while we were away.”

“Yes, to be sure. We must be away a week or so.”

“Oh, more than that!” said Rosamond earnestly. She was thinking of her evening dresses for the visit to Sir Godwin Lydgate’s, which she had long been secretly hoping for as a delightful employment of at least one quarter of the honeymoon, even if she deferred her introduction to the uncle who was a doctor of divinity (also a pleasing though sober kind of rank, when sustained by blood). She looked at her lover with some wondering remonstrance as she spoke, and he readily understood that she might wish to lengthen the sweet time of double solitude.

“Whatever you wish, my darling, when the day is fixed. But let us take a decided course and put an end to any discomfort you may be suffering. Six weeks! I am sure they would be ample.”

“I could certainly hasten the work,” said Rosamond. “Will you, then, mention it to Papa? I think it would be better to write to him.” She blushed and looked at him as the garden flowers look at us when we walk forth happily among them in the transcendent evening light. Is there not a soul beyond utterance, half nymph, half child, in those delicate petals which glow and breathe about the centres of deep colour?

He touched her ear and a little bit of neck under it with his lips, and they sat quite still for many minutes, which flowed by them like a small gurgling brook with the kisses of the sun upon it. Rosamond thought that no one could be more in love than she was, and Lydgate thought that after all his wild mistakes and absurd credulity he had found perfect womanhood, felt as if already breathed upon by exquisite wedded affection such as would be bestowed by an accomplished creature who venerated his high musings and momentous labours and would never interfere with them, who would create order in the home and accounts with still magic, yet keep her fingers ready to touch the lute and transform life into romance at any moment, who was instructed to the true womanly limit and not a hair’s-breadth beyond—docile, therefore, and ready to carry out behests which came from beyond that limit. It was plainer now than ever that his notion of remaining much longer a bachelor had been a mistake: marriage would not be an obstruction but a furtherance. And happening the next day to accompany a patient to Brassing, he saw a dinner-service there which struck him as so exactly the right thing that he bought it at once. It saved time to do these things just when you thought of them, and Lydgate hated ugly crockery. The dinner-service in question was expensive, but that might be in the nature of dinner-services. Furnishing was necessarily expensive, but then it had to be done only once.

“It must be lovely,” said Mrs. Vincy when Lydgate mentioned his purchase with some descriptive touches. “Just what Rosy ought to have. I trust in heaven it won’t be broken!”

“One must hire servants who will not break things,” said Lydgate. (Certainly, this was reasoning with an imperfect vision of sequences. But at that period there was no sort of reasoning which was not more or less sanctioned by men of science.)

Of course it was unnecessary to defer the mention of anything to Mamma, who did not readily take views that were not cheerful, and being a happy wife herself, had hardly any feeling but pride in her daughter’s marriage. But Rosamond had good reasons for suggesting to Lydgate that Papa should be appealed to in writing. She prepared for the arrival of the letter by walking with her papa to the warehouse the next morning and telling him on the way that Mr. Lydgate wished to be

married soon.

"Nonsense, my dear," said Mr. Vincy. "What has he got to marry on? You'd much better give up the engagement. I've told you so pretty plainly before this. What have you had such an education for if you are to go and marry a poor man? It's a cruel thing for a father to see."

"Mr. Lydgate is not poor, Papa. He bought Mr. Peacock's practice, which, they say, is worth eight or nine hundred a year."

"Stuff and nonsense! What's buying a practice? He might as well buy next year's swallows. It'll all slip through his fingers."

"On the contrary, Papa, he will increase the practice. See how he has been called in by the Chettams and Casaubons."

"I hope he knows I shan't give anything, with this disappointment about Fred, and Parliament going to be dissolved, and machine-breaking everywhere, and an election coming on—"

"Dear Papa! what can that have to do with my marriage?"

"A pretty deal to do with it! We may all be ruined for what I know—the country's in that state! Some say it's the end of the world, and be hanged if I don't think it looks like it. Anyhow, it's not a time for me to be drawing money out of my business, and I should wish Lydgate to know that."

"I am sure he expects nothing, Papa. And he has such very high connexions; he is sure to rise in one way or another. He is engaged in making scientific discoveries."

Mr. Vincy was silent.

"I cannot give up my only prospect of happiness, Papa. Mr. Lydgate is a gentleman. I could never love anyone who was not a perfect gentleman. You would not like me to go into a consumption, as Arabella Hawley did. And you know that I never change my mind."

Again Papa was silent.

"Promise me, Papa, that you will consent to what we wish. We shall never give each other up, and you know that you have always objected to long courtships and late marriages."

There was a little more urgency of this kind till Mr. Vincy said, "Well, well, child, he must write to me first before I can answer him," and Rosamond was certain that she had gained her point.

Mr. Vincy's answer consisted chiefly in a demand that Lydgate should insure his life—a demand immediately conceded. This was a delightfully reassuring idea supposing that Lydgate died, but in the meantime not a self-supporting idea. However, it seemed to make everything comfortable about Rosamond's marriage and the necessary purchases went on with much spirit. Not without prudential considerations, however. A bride (who is going to visit at a baronet's) must have a few first-rate pocket handkerchiefs, but beyond the absolutely necessary half-dozen, Rosamond contented herself without the very highest style of embroidery and Valenciennes. Lydgate also, finding that his sum of eight hundred pounds had been considerably reduced since he had come to Middlemarch, restrained his inclination for some plate of an old pattern which was shown to him when he went into Kibble's establishment at Brassing to buy forks and spoons. He was too proud to act as if he presupposed that Mr. Vincy would advance money to provide furniture; and though, since it would not be necessary to pay for everything at once, some bills would be left standing over, he did not waste time in conjecturing how much his father-in-law would give in the form of dowry to make payment easy. He was not going to do anything extravagant, but the requisite things must be bought, and it would be bad economy to buy them of a poor quality. All these matters were by the by. Lydgate foresaw that science and his profession were the objects he should alone pursue enthusiastically, but he could not imagine himself pursuing them in such a home as Wrench had—the doors all open, the oil-cloth worn, the children in soiled pinafores, and lunch lingering in the form of bones, black-handled knives, and willow-pattern. But Wrench had a wretched lymphatic wife who made a mummy of herself indoors in a large shawl, and he must have altogether begun with an ill-chosen domestic apparatus.

Rosamond, however, was on her side much occupied with conjectures, though her quick, imitative perception warned her against betraying them too crudely.

"I shall like so much to know your family," she said one day when the wedding-journey was being discussed. "We might perhaps take a direction that would allow us to see them as we returned. Which of your uncles do you like best?"

"Oh, my uncle Godwin, I think. He is a good-natured old fellow."

"You were constantly at his house at Quallingham when you were a boy, were you not? I should so like to see the old spot and everything you were used to. Does he know you are going to be married?"

"No," said Lydgate carelessly, turning in his chair and rubbing his hair up.

"Do send him word of it, you naughty, undutiful nephew. He will perhaps ask you to take me to Quallingham; and then you could show me about the grounds, and I could imagine you there when you were a boy. Remember, you see me in my home just as it has been since I was a child. It is not fair that I should be so ignorant of yours. But perhaps you would be a little ashamed of me. I forgot that."

Lydgate smiled at her tenderly and really accepted the suggestion that the proud pleasure of showing so charming a bride was worth some trouble. And now he came to think of it, he would like to see the old spots with Rosamond.

"I will write to him, then. But my cousins are bores."

It seemed magnificent to Rosamond to be able to speak so slightingly of a baronet's family, and she felt much contentment in the prospect of being able to estimate them contemptuously on her own account.

But Mamma was near spoiling all a day or two later by saying, "I hope your uncle Sir Godwin will not look down on Rosy, Mr. Lydgate. I should think he would do something handsome. A thousand or two can be nothing to a baronet."

"Mamma!" said Rosamond, blushing deeply; and Lydgate pitied her so much that he remained silent and went to the other end of the room to examine a print curiously, as if he had been absent-minded. Mamma had a little filial lecture afterwards and was docile as usual. But Rosamond reflected that if any of those high-bred cousins who were bores should be induced to visit Middlemarch, they would see many things in her own family which might shock them. Hence it seemed desirable that Lydgate should by and by get some first-rate position elsewhere than in Middlemarch; and this could hardly

be difficult in the case of a man who had a titled uncle and could make discoveries. Lydgate, you perceive, had talked fervidly to Rosamond of his hopes as to the highest uses of his life and had found it delightful to be listened to by a creature who would bring him the sweet furtherance of satisfying affection—beauty—repose—such help as our thoughts get from the summer sky and the flower-fringed meadows.

Lydgate relied much on the psychological difference between what for the sake of variety I will call goose and gander, especially on the innate submissiveness of the goose as beautifully corresponding to the strength of the gander.

CHAPTER 37

Thrice happy she that is so well assured
Unto herself, and settled so in heart,
That neither will for better be allured
Ne fears to worse with any chance to start,
But like a steddy ship doth strongly part
The raging waves, and keeps her course aright;
Ne aught for tempest doth from it depart,
Ne aught for fairer weather's false delight.
Such self-assurance need not fear the spight
Of grudging foes; ne favour seek of friends;
But in the stay of her own stedfast might
Neither to one herself nor other bends.
Most happy she that most assured doth rest,
But he most happy who such one loves best.

—SPENSER

The doubt hinted by Mr. Vincy whether it were only the general election or the end of the world that was coming on, now that George the Fourth was dead, Parliament dissolved, Wellington and Peel generally depreciated, and the new king apologetic was a feeble type of the uncertainties in provincial opinion at that time. With the glow-worm lights of country places, how could men see which were their own thoughts in the confusion of a Tory ministry passing Liberal measures, of Tory nobles and electors being anxious to return Liberals rather than friends of the recreant ministers, and of outcries for remedies which seemed to have a mysteriously remote bearing on private interest and were made suspicious by the advocacy of disagreeable neighbours? Buyers of the Middlemarch newspapers found themselves in an anomalous position; during the agitation on the Catholic Question many had given up the *Pioneer*, which had a motto from Charles James Fox and was in the van of progress, because it had taken Peel's side about the papists and had thus blotted its Liberalism with a toleration of Jesuitry and Baal; but they were ill-satisfied with the *Trumpet*, which, since its blasts against Rome, and in the general flaccidity of the public mind (nobody knowing who would support whom), had become feeble in its blowing.

It was a time, according to a noticeable article in the *Pioneer*, when the crying needs of the country might well counteract a reluctance to public action on the part of men whose minds had from long experience acquired breadth as well as concentration, decision of judgement as well as tolerance, dispassionateness as well as energy—in fact, all those qualities which in the melancholy experience of mankind have been the least disposed to share lodgings.

Mr. Hackbutt, whose fluent speech was at that time floating more widely than usual and leaving much uncertainty as to its ultimate channel, was heard to say in Mr. Hawley's office that the article in question "emanated" from Brooke of Tipton and that Brooke had secretly bought the *Pioneer* some months ago.

"That means mischief, eh?" said Mr. Hawley. "He's got the freak of being a popular man now after dangling about like a stray tortoise. So much the worse for him. I've had my eye on him for some time. He shall be prettily pumped upon. He's a damned bad landlord. What business has an old county man to come currying favour with a low set of dark-blue freemen? As to his paper, I only hope he may do the writing himself. It would be worth our paying for."

"I understand he has got a very brilliant young fellow to edit it, who can write the highest style of leading article, quite equal to anything in the London papers. And he means to take very high ground on Reform."

"Let Brooke reform his rent-roll. He's a cursed old screw, and the buildings all over his estate are going to rack. I suppose this young fellow is some loose fish from London."

"His name is Ladislaw. He is said to be of foreign extraction."

"I know the sort," said Mr. Hawley; "some emissary. He'll begin with flourishing about the Rights of Man and end with murdering a wench. That's the style."

"You must concede that there are abuses, Hawley," said Mr. Hackbutt, foreseeing some political disagreement with his family lawyer. "I myself should never favour immoderate views—in fact I take my stand with Huskisson—but I cannot blind myself to the consideration that the non-representation of large towns—"

"Large towns be damned!" said Mr. Hawley, impatient of exposition. "I know a little too much about Middlemarch elections. Let 'em quash every pocket borough tomorrow and bring in every mushroom town in the kingdom, they'll only increase the expense of getting into Parliament. I go upon facts."

Mr. Hawley's disgust at the notion of the *Pioneer* being edited by an emissary and of Brooke becoming actively political—as if a tortoise of desultory pursuits should protrude its small head ambitiously and become rampant—was hardly equal to the annoyance felt by some members of Mr. Brooke's own family. The result had oozed forth gradually, like the discovery that your neighbour has set up an unpleasant kind of manufacture which will be permanently under your nostrils without legal remedy. The *Pioneer* had been secretly bought even before Will Ladislaw's arrival, the expected opportunity having offered itself in the readiness of the proprietor to part with a valuable property which did not pay; and in the interval since Mr. Brooke had written his invitation, those germinal ideas of making his mind tell upon the world at large which had been present in him from his younger years, but had hitherto lain in some obstruction, had been sprouting

under cover.

The development was much furthered by a delight in his guest which proved greater even than he had anticipated. For it seemed that Will was not only at home in all those artistic and literary subjects which Mr. Brooke had gone into at one time but that he was strikingly ready at seizing the points of the political situation and dealing with them in that large spirit which, aided by adequate memory, lends itself to quotation and general effectiveness of treatment.

"He seems to me a kind of Shelley, you know," Mr. Brooke took an opportunity of saying for the gratification of Mr. Casaubon. "I don't mean as to anything objectionable—laxities or atheism, or anything of that kind, you know—Ladislaw's sentiments in every way I am sure are good—indeed, we were talking a great deal together last night. But he has the same sort of enthusiasm for liberty, freedom, emancipation; a fine thing under guidance—under guidance, you know. I think I shall be able to put him on the right tack, and I am the more pleased because he is a relation of yours, Casaubon."

If the right tack implied anything more precise than the rest of Mr. Brooke's speech, Mr. Casaubon silently hoped that it referred to some occupation at a great distance from Lowick. He had disliked Will while he helped him, but he had begun to dislike him still more now that Will had declined his help. That is the way with us when we have any uneasy jealousy in our disposition: if our talents are chiefly of the burrowing kind, our honey-sipping cousin (whom we have grave reasons for objecting to) is likely to have a secret contempt for us, and anyone who admires him passes an oblique criticism on ourselves. Having the scruples of rectitude in our souls, we are above the meanness of injuring him, rather we meet all his claims on us by active benefits, and the drawing of cheques for him, being a superiority which he must recognize, gives our bitterness a milder infusion. Now Mr. Casaubon had been deprived of that superiority (as anything more than a remembrance) in a sudden, capricious manner. His antipathy to Will did not spring from the common jealousy of a winter-worn husband; it was something deeper, bred by his lifelong claims and discontents, but Dorothea, now that she was present—Dorothea, as a young wife who herself had shown an offensive capability of criticism, necessarily gave concentration to the uneasiness which had before been vague.

Will Ladislaw on his side felt that his dislike was flourishing at the expense of his gratitude and spent much inward discourse in justifying the dislike. Casaubon hated him—he knew that very well; on his first entrance he could discern a bitterness in the mouth and a venom in the glance which would almost justify declaring war in spite of past benefits. He was much obliged to Casaubon in the past, but really the act of marrying this wife was a set-off against the obligation. It was a question whether gratitude which refers to what is done for one's self ought not to give way to indignation at what is done against another. And Casaubon had done a wrong to Dorothea in marrying her. A man was bound to know himself better than that and if he chose to grow grey, crunching bones in a cavern, he had no business to be luring a girl into his companionship. "It is the most horrible of virgin sacrifices," said Will; and he painted to himself what were Dorothea's inward sorrows as if he had been writing a choric wail. But he would never lose sight of her; he would watch over her—if he gave up everything else in life he would watch over her, and she should know that she had one slave in the world. Will had—to use Sir Thomas Browne's phrase—a "passionate prodigality" of statement both to himself and others. The simple truth was that nothing then invited him so strongly as the presence of Dorothea.

Invitations of the formal kind had been wanting, however, for Will had never been asked to go to Lowick. Mr. Brooke, indeed, confident of doing everything agreeable which Casaubon, poor fellow, was too much absorbed to think of, had arranged to bring Ladislaw to Lowick several times (not neglecting meanwhile to introduce him elsewhere on every opportunity as "a young relative of Casaubon's"). And though Will had not seen Dorothea alone, their interviews had been enough to restore her former sense of young companionship with one who was cleverer than herself, yet seemed ready to be swayed by her. Poor Dorothea before her marriage had never found much room in other minds for what she cared most to say; and she had not, as we know, enjoyed her husband's superior instruction so much as she had expected. If she spoke with any keenness of interest to Mr. Casaubon, he heard her with an air of patience as if she had given a quotation from the Delectus familiar to him from his tender years, and sometimes mentioned curtly what ancient sects or personages had held similar ideas, as if there were too much of that sort in stock already; at other times he would inform her that she was mistaken and reassert what her remark had questioned.

But Will Ladislaw always seemed to see more in what she said than she herself saw. Dorothea had little vanity, but she had the ardent woman's need to rule beneficently by making the joy of another soul. Hence the mere chance of seeing Will occasionally was like a lunette opened in the wall of her prison, giving her a glimpse of the sunny air; and this pleasure began to nullify her original alarm at what her husband might think about the introduction of Will as her uncle's guest. On this subject Mr. Casaubon had remained dumb.

But Will wanted to talk with Dorothea alone and was impatient of slow circumstance. However slight the terrestrial intercourse between Dante and Beatrice or Petrarch and Laura, time changes the proportion of things, and in later days it is preferable to have fewer sonnets and more conversation. Necessity excused stratagem, but stratagem was limited by the dread of offending Dorothea. He found out at last that he wanted to take a particular sketch at Lowick; and one morning when Mr. Brooke had to drive along the Lowick road on his way to the county town, Will asked to be set down with his sketchbook and camp-stool at Lowick, and without announcing himself at the manor, settled himself to sketch in a position where he must see Dorothea if she came out to walk—and he knew that she usually walked an hour in the morning.

But the stratagem was defeated by the weather. Clouds gathered with treacherous quickness, the rain came down, and Will was obliged to take shelter in the house. He intended, on the strength of relationship, to go into the drawing-room and wait there without being announced; and seeing his old acquaintance the butler in the hall, he said, "Don't mention that I am here, Pratt; I will wait till luncheon; I know Mr. Casaubon does not like to be disturbed when he is in the library."

"Master is out, sir; there's only Mrs. Casaubon in the library. I'd better tell her you're here, sir," said Pratt, a red-cheeked man given to lively converse with Tantripp and often agreeing with her that it must be dull for Madam.

"Oh, very well; this confounded rain has hindered me from sketching," said Will, feeling so happy that he affected indifference with delightful ease.

In another minute he was in the library, and Dorothea was meeting him with her sweet, unconstrained smile.

"Mr. Casaubon has gone to the archdeacon's," she said at once. "I don't know whether he will be at home again long

before dinner. He was uncertain how long he should be. Did you want to say anything particular to him?"

"No; I came to sketch, but the rain drove me in. Else I would not have disturbed you yet. I supposed that Mr. Casaubon was here, and I know he dislikes interruption at this hour."

"I am indebted to the rain, then. I am so glad to see you." Dorothea uttered these common words with the simple sincerity of an unhappy child visited at school.

"I really came for the chance of seeing you alone," said Will, mysteriously forced to be just as simple as she was. He could not stay to ask himself, why not? "I wanted to talk about things, as we did in Rome. It always makes a difference when other people are present."

"Yes," said Dorothea in her clear, full tone of assent. "Sit down." She seated herself on a dark ottoman with the brown books behind her, looking in her plain dress of some thin woollen-white material, without a single ornament on her besides her wedding-ring, as if she were under a vow to be different from all other women; and Will sat down opposite her at two yards' distance, the light falling on his bright curls and delicate but rather petulant profile, with its defiant curves of lip and chin. Each looked at the other as if they had been two flowers which had opened then and there. Dorothea for the moment forgot her husband's mysterious irritation against Will: it seemed fresh water at her thirsty lips to speak without fear to the one person whom she had found receptive, for in looking backward through sadness she exaggerated a past solace.

"I have often thought that I should like to talk to you again," she said immediately. "It seems strange to me how many things I said to you."

"I remember them all," said Will with the unspeakable content in his soul of feeling that he was in the presence of a creature worthy to be perfectly loved. I think his own feelings at that moment were perfect, for we mortals have our divine moments when love is satisfied in the completeness of the beloved object.

"I have tried to learn a great deal since we were in Rome," said Dorothea. "I can read Latin a little, and I am beginning to understand just a little Greek. I can help Mr. Casaubon better now. I can find out references for him and save his eyes in many ways. But it is very difficult to be learned; it seems as if people were worn out on the way to great thoughts and can never enjoy them because they are too tired."

"If a man has a capacity for great thoughts, he is likely to overtake them before he is decrepit," said Will with irrepressible quickness. But through certain sensibilities Dorothea was as quick as he, and seeing her face change, he added immediately, "But it is quite true that the best minds have been sometimes overstrained in working out their ideas."

"You correct me," said Dorothea. "I expressed myself ill. I should have said that those who have great thoughts get too much worn in working them out. I used to feel about that, even when I was a little girl; and it always seemed to me that the use I should like to make of my life would be to help someone who did great works so that his burden might be lighter."

Dorothea was led on to this bit of autobiography without any sense of making a revelation. But she had never before said anything to Will which threw so strong a light on her marriage. He did not shrug his shoulders; and for want of that muscular outlet he thought the more irritably of beautiful lips kissing holy skulls and other emptinesses ecclesiastically enshrined. Also he had to take care that his speech should not betray that thought.

"But you may easily carry the help too far," he said, "and get over-wrought yourself. Are you not too much shut up? You already look paler. It would be better for Mr. Casaubon to have a secretary; he could easily get a man who would do half his work for him. It would save him more effectually, and you need only help him in lighter ways."

"How can you think of that?" said Dorothea in a tone of earnest remonstrance. "I should have no happiness if I did not help him in his work. What could I do? There is no good to be done in Lowick. The only thing I desire is to help him more. And he objects to a secretary; please not to mention that again."

"Certainly not, now I know your feeling. But I have heard both Mr. Brooke and Sir James Chettam express the same wish."

"Yes," said Dorothea, "but they don't understand—they want me to be a great deal on horseback and have the garden altered and new conservatories to fill up my days. I thought you could understand that one's mind has other wants," she added rather impatiently. "Besides, Mr. Casaubon cannot bear to hear of a secretary."

"My mistake is excusable," said Will. "In old days I used to hear Mr. Casaubon speak as if he looked forward to having a secretary. Indeed he held out the prospect of that office to me. But I turned out to be—not good enough for it."

Dorothea was trying to extract out of this an excuse for her husband's evident repulsion, as she said with a playful smile, "You were not a steady worker enough."

"No," said Will, shaking his head backward somewhat after the manner of a spirited horse. And then, the old irritable demon prompting him to give another good pinch at the moth-wings of poor Mr. Casaubon's glory, he went on, "And I have seen since that Mr. Casaubon does not like anyone to overlook his work and know thoroughly what he is doing. He is too doubtful—too uncertain of himself. I may not be good for much, but he dislikes me because I disagree with him."

Will was not without his intentions to be always generous, but our tongues are little triggers which have usually been pulled before general intentions can be brought to bear. And it was too intolerable that Casaubon's dislike of him should not be fairly accounted for to Dorothea. Yet when he had spoken he was rather uneasy as to the effect on her.

But Dorothea was strangely quiet—not immediately indignant, as she had been on a like occasion in Rome. And the cause lay deep. She was no longer struggling against the perception of facts, but adjusting herself to their clearest perception; and now when she looked steadily at her husband's failure, still more at his possible consciousness of failure, she seemed to be looking along the one track where duty became tenderness. Will's want of reticence might have been met with more severity if he had not already been recommended to her mercy by her husband's dislike, which must seem hard to her till she saw better reason for it.

She did not answer at once, but after looking down ruminatingly she said with some earnestness, "Mr. Casaubon must have overcome his dislike of you so far as his actions were concerned, and that is admirable."

"Yes; he has shown a sense of justice in family matters. It was an abominable thing that my grandmother should have been disinherited because she made what they called a *mésalliance*, though there was nothing to be said against her

husband except that he was a Polish refugee who gave lessons for his bread."

"I wish I knew all about her!" said Dorothea. "I wonder how she bore the change from wealth to poverty; I wonder whether she was happy with her husband! Do you know much about them?"

"No, only that my grandfather was a patriot—a bright fellow—could speak many languages—musical—got his bread by teaching all sorts of things. They both died rather early. And I never knew much of my father beyond what my mother told me, but he inherited the musical talents. I remember his slow walk and his long thin hands; and one day remains with me when he was lying ill, and I was very hungry and had only a little bit of bread."

"Ah, what a different life from mine!" said Dorothea with keen interest, clasping her hands on her lap. "I have always had too much of everything. But tell me how it was—Mr. Casaubon could not have known about you then."

"No, but my father had made himself known to Mr. Casaubon, and that was my last hungry day. My father died soon after, and my mother and I were well taken care of. Mr. Casaubon always expressly recognized it as his duty to take care of us because of the harsh injustice which had been shown to his mother's sister. But now I am telling you what is not new to you."

In his inmost soul Will was conscious of wishing to tell Dorothea what was rather new even in his own construction of things—namely, that Mr. Casaubon had never done more than pay a debt towards him. Will was much too good a fellow to be easy under the sense of being ungrateful. And when gratitude has become a matter of reasoning there are many ways of escaping from its bonds.

"No," answered Dorothea; "Mr. Casaubon has always avoided dwelling on his own honourable actions." She did not feel that her husband's conduct was depreciated, but this notion of what justice had required in his relations with Will Ladislaw took strong hold on her mind. After a moment's pause, she added, "He had never told me that he supported your mother. Is she still living?"

"No; she died by an accident—a fall—four years ago. It is curious that my mother, too, ran away from her family, but not for the sake of her husband. She never would tell me anything about her family except that she forsook them to get her own living—went on the stage, in fact. She was a dark-eyed creature, with crisp ringlets, and never seemed to be getting old. You see I come of rebellious blood on both sides," Will ended, smiling brightly at Dorothea, while she was still looking with serious intentness before her like a child seeing a drama for the first time.

But her face, too, broke into a smile as she said, "That is your apology, I suppose, for having yourself been rather rebellious; I mean, to Mr. Casaubon's wishes. You must remember that you have not done what he thought best for you. And if he dislikes you—you were speaking of dislike a little while ago—but I should rather say, if he has shown any painful feelings towards you, you must consider how sensitive he has become from the wearing effect of study. Perhaps," she continued, getting into a pleading tone, "my uncle has not told you how serious Mr. Casaubon's illness was. It would be very petty of us who are well and can bear things to think much of small offences from those who carry a weight of trial."

"You teach me better," said Will. "I will never grumble on that subject again." There was a gentleness in his tone which came from the unutterable contentment of perceiving—what Dorothea was hardly conscious of—that she was travelling into the remoteness of pure pity and loyalty towards her husband. Will was ready to adore her pity and loyalty if she would associate himself with her in manifesting them. "I have really sometimes been a perverse fellow," he went on, "but I will never again, if I can help it, do or say what you would disapprove."

"That is very good of you," said Dorothea with another open smile. "I shall have a little kingdom then, where I shall give laws. But you will soon go away, out of my rule, I imagine. You will soon be tired of staying at the Grange."

"That is a point I wanted to mention to you—one of the reasons why I wished to speak to you alone. Mr. Brooke proposes that I should stay in this neighbourhood. He has bought one of the Middlemarch newspapers, and he wishes me to conduct that and also to help him in other ways."

"Would not that be a sacrifice of higher prospects for you?" said Dorothea.

"Perhaps; but I have always been blamed for thinking of prospects and not settling to anything. And here is something offered to me. If you would not like me to accept it, I will give it up. Otherwise I would rather stay in this part of the country than go away. I belong to nobody anywhere else."

"I should like you to stay very much," said Dorothea at once, as simply and readily as she had spoken at Rome. There was not the shadow of a reason in her mind at the moment why she should not say so.

"Then I *will* stay," said Ladislaw, shaking his head backward, rising, and going towards the window as if to see whether the rain had ceased.

But the next moment, Dorothea, according to a habit which was getting continually stronger, began to reflect that her husband felt differently from herself, and she coloured deeply under the double embarrassment of having expressed what might be in opposition to her husband's feeling and of having to suggest this opposition to Will. His face was not turned towards her, and this made it easier to say. "But my opinion is of little consequence on such a subject. I think you should be guided by Mr. Casaubon. I spoke without thinking of anything else than my own feeling, which has nothing to do with the real question. But it now occurs to me—perhaps Mr. Casaubon might see that the proposal was not wise. Can you not wait now and mention it to him?"

"I can't wait today," said Will, inwardly scared by the possibility that Mr. Casaubon would enter. "The rain is quite over now. I told Mr. Brooke not to call for me: I would rather walk the five miles. I shall strike across Halsell Common and see the gleams on the wet grass. I like that."

He approached her to shake hands quite hurriedly, longing but not daring to say, "Don't mention the subject to Mr. Casaubon." No, he dared not, could not say it. To ask her to be less simple and direct would be like breathing on the crystal that you want to see the light through. And there was always the other great dread—of himself becoming dimmed and forever ray-shorn in her eyes.

"I wish you could have stayed," said Dorothea with a touch of mournfulness as she rose and put out her hand. She also had her thought which she did not like to express: Will certainly ought to lose no time in consulting Mr. Casaubon's wishes, but for her to urge this might seem an undue dictation.

So they only said “Good-bye,” and Will quitted the house, striking across the fields so as not to run any risk of encountering Mr. Casaubon’s carriage, which, however, did not appear at the gate until four o’clock. That was an unpropitious hour for coming home: it was too early to gain the moral support under ennui of dressing his person for dinner and too late to undress his mind of the day’s frivolous ceremony and affairs so as to be prepared for a good plunge into the serious business of study. On such occasions he usually threw himself into an easy-chair in the library and allowed Dorothea to read the London papers to him, closing his eyes the while. Today, however, he declined that relief, observing that he had already had too many public details urged upon him; but he spoke more cheerfully than usual when Dorothea asked about his fatigue, and added with that air of formal effort which never forsook him even when he spoke without his waistcoat and cravat, “I have had the gratification of meeting my former acquaintance Dr. Spanning today and of being praised by one who is himself a worthy recipient of praise. He spoke very handsomely of my late tractate on the Egyptian Mysteries, using, in fact, terms which it would not become me to repeat.” In uttering the last clause, Mr. Casaubon leaned over the elbow of his chair and swayed his head up and down, apparently as a muscular outlet instead of that recapitulation which would not have been becoming.

“I am very glad you have had that pleasure,” said Dorothea, delighted to see her husband less weary than usual at this hour. “Before you came I had been regretting that you happened to be out today.”

“Why so, my dear?” said Mr. Casaubon, throwing himself backward again.

“Because Mr. Ladislaw has been here, and he has mentioned a proposal of my uncle’s which I should like to know your opinion of.” Her husband she felt was really concerned in this question. Even with her ignorance of the world she had a vague impression that the position offered to Will was out of keeping with his family connexions, and certainly Mr. Casaubon had a claim to be consulted. He did not speak, but merely bowed.

“Dear Uncle, you know, has many projects. It appears that he has bought one of the Middlemarch newspapers, and he has asked Mr. Ladislaw to stay in this neighbourhood and conduct the paper for him, besides helping him in other ways.”

Dorothea looked at her husband while she spoke, but he had at first blinked and finally closed his eyes as if to save them, while his lips became more tense. “What is your opinion?” she added rather timidly after a slight pause.

“Did Mr. Ladislaw come on purpose to ask my opinion?” said Mr. Casaubon, opening his eyes narrowly, with a knife-edged look at Dorothea. She was really uncomfortable on the point he inquired about, but she only became a little more serious, and her eyes did not swerve.

“No,” she answered immediately, “he did not say that he came to ask your opinion. But when he mentioned the proposal, he of course expected me to tell you of it.”

Mr. Casaubon was silent.

“I feared that you might feel some objection. But certainly a young man with so much talent might be very useful to my uncle—might help him to do good in a better way. And Mr. Ladislaw wishes to have some fixed occupation. He has been blamed, he says, for not seeking something of that kind, and he would like to stay in this neighbourhood because no one cares for him elsewhere.”

Dorothea felt that this was a consideration to soften her husband. However, he did not speak, and she presently recurred to Dr. Spanning and the archdeacon’s breakfast. But there was no longer sunshine on these subjects.

The next morning, without Dorothea’s knowledge, Mr. Casaubon dispatched the following letter, beginning “Dear Mr. Ladislaw” (he had always before addressed him as “Will”):

> *Mrs. Casaubon informs me that a proposal has been made to you and (according to an inference by no means stretched) has on your part been in some degree entertained, which involves your residence in this neighbourhood in a capacity which I am justified in saying touches my own position in such a way as renders it not only natural and warrantable in me when that effect is viewed under the influence of legitimate feeling, but incumbent on me when the same effect is considered in the light of my responsibilities, to state at once that your acceptance of the proposal above indicated would be highly offensive to me. That I have some claim to the exercise of a veto here would not, I believe, be denied by any reasonable person cognizant of the relations between us: relations which, though thrown into the past by your recent procedure, are not thereby annulled in their character of determining antecedents. I will not here make reflections on any person’s judgement. It is enough for me to point out to yourself that there are certain social fitnesses and proprieties which should hinder a somewhat near relative of mine from becoming in anywise conspicuous in this vicinity in a status not only much beneath my own, but associated at best with the sciolism of literary or political adventurers. At any rate, the contrary issue must exclude you from further reception at my house.—Yours faithfully,*
>
> *Edward Casaubon*

Meanwhile Dorothea’s mind was innocently at work towards the further embitterment of her husband, dwelling with a sympathy that grew to agitation on what Will had told her about his parents and grandparents. Any private hours in her day were usually spent in her blue-green boudoir, and she had come to be very fond of its pallid quaintness. Nothing had been outwardly altered there, but while the summer had gradually advanced over the western fields beyond the avenue of elms, the bare room had gathered within it those memories of an inward life which fill the air as with a cloud of good or bad angels, the invisible yet active forms of our spiritual triumphs or our spiritual falls. She had been so used to struggle for and to find resolve in looking along the avenue towards the arch of western light that the vision itself had gained a communicating power. Even the pale stag seemed to have reminding glances and to mean mutely, “Yes, we know.” And the group of delicately touched miniatures had made an audience as of beings no longer disturbed about their own earthly lot, but still humanly interested. Especially the mysterious “aunt Julia” about whom Dorothea had never found it easy to question her husband.

And now, since her conversation with Will, many fresh images had gathered round that aunt Julia who was Will’s grandmother: the presence of that delicate miniature, so like a living face that she knew, helping to concentrate her feelings. What a wrong to cut off the girl from the family protection and inheritance only because she had chosen a man who was poor! Dorothea, early troubling her elders with questions about the facts around her, had wrought herself into some independent clearness as to the historical, political reasons why eldest sons had superior rights and why land should

be entailed; those reasons, impressing her with a certain awe, might be weightier than she knew, but here was a question of ties which left them uninfringed. Here was a daughter whose child—even according to the ordinary aping of aristocratic institutions by people who are no more aristocratic than retired grocers and who have no more land to "keep together" than a lawn and a paddock—would have a prior claim. Was inheritance a question of liking or of responsibility? All the energy of Dorothea's nature went on the side of responsibility—the fulfilment of claims founded on our own deeds, such as marriage and parentage.

It was true, she said to herself, that Mr. Casaubon had a debt to the Ladislaws, that he had to pay back what the Ladislaws had been wronged of. And now she began to think of her husband's will, which had been made at the time of their marriage, leaving the bulk of his property to her, with proviso in case of her having children. That ought to be altered, and no time ought to be lost. This very question which had just arisen about Will Ladislaw's occupation was the occasion for placing things on a new, right footing. Her husband, she felt sure, according to all his previous conduct, would be ready to take the just view if she proposed it—she, in whose interest an unfair concentration of the property had been urged. His sense of right had surmounted and would continue to surmount anything that might be called antipathy. She suspected that her uncle's scheme was disapproved by Mr. Casaubon, and this made it seem all the more opportune that a fresh understanding should be begun so that instead of Will's starting penniless and accepting the first function that offered itself, he should find himself in possession of a rightful income which should be paid by her husband during his life, and by an immediate alteration of the will, should be secured at his death. The vision of all this as what ought to be done seemed to Dorothea like a sudden letting in of daylight, waking her from her previous stupidity and incurious, self-absorbed ignorance about her husband's relation to others. Will Ladislaw had refused Mr. Casaubon's future aid on a ground that no longer appeared right to her, and Mr. Casaubon had never himself seen fully what was the claim upon him. "But he will!" said Dorothea. "The great strength of his character lies here. And what are we doing with our money? We make no use of half of our income. My own money buys me nothing but an uneasy conscience."

There was a peculiar fascination for Dorothea in this division of property intended for herself and always regarded by her as excessive. She was blind, you see, to many things obvious to others—likely to tread in the wrong places, as Celia had warned her; yet her blindness to whatever did not lie in her own pure purpose carried her safely by the side of precipices where vision would have been perilous with fear.

The thoughts which had gathered vividness in the solitude of her boudoir occupied her incessantly through the day on which Mr. Casaubon had sent his letter to Will. Everything seemed hindrance to her till she could find an opportunity of opening her heart to her husband. To his preoccupied mind all subjects were to be approached gently, and she had never since his illness lost from her consciousness the dread of agitating him. But when young ardour is set brooding over the conception of a prompt deed, the deed itself seems to start forth with independent life, mastering ideal obstacles. The day passed in a sombre fashion, not unusual, though Mr. Casaubon was perhaps unusually silent; but there were hours of the night which might be counted on as opportunities of conversation, for Dorothea, when aware of her husband's sleeplessness, had established the habit of rising, lighting a candle, and reading him to sleep again. And this night she was from the beginning sleepless, excited by resolves. He slept as usual for a few hours, but she had risen softly and had sat in the darkness for nearly an hour before he said, "Dorothea, since you are up, will you light a candle?"

"Do you feel ill, dear?" was her first question, as she obeyed him.

"No, not at all; but I shall be obliged, since you are up, if you will read me a few pages of Lowth."

"May I talk to you a little, instead?" said Dorothea.

"Certainly."

"I have been thinking about money all day—that I have always had too much, and especially the prospect of too much."

"These, my dear Dorothea, are providential arrangements."

"But if one has too much in consequence of others being wronged, it seems to me that the Divine voice which tells us to set that wrong right must be obeyed."

"What, my love, is the bearing of your remark?"

"That you have been too liberal in arrangements for me—I mean, with regard to property; and that makes me unhappy."

"How so? I have none but comparatively distant connexions."

"I have been led to think about your aunt Julia and how she was left in poverty only because she married a poor man, an act which was not disgraceful, since he was not unworthy. It was on that ground, I know, that you educated Mr. Ladislaw and provided for his mother."

Dorothea waited a few moments for some answer that would help her onward. None came, and her next words seemed the more forcible to her, falling clear upon the dark silence.

"But surely we should regard his claim as a much greater one, even to the half of that property which I know that you have destined for me. And I think he ought at once to be provided for on that understanding. It is not right that he should be in the dependence of poverty while we are rich. And if there is any objection to the proposal he mentioned, the giving him his true place and his true share would set aside any motive for his accepting it."

"Mr. Ladislaw has probably been speaking to you on this subject?" said Mr. Casaubon with a certain biting quickness not habitual to him.

"Indeed, no!" said Dorothea earnestly. "How can you imagine it, since he has so lately declined everything from you? I fear you think too hardly of him, dear. He only told me a little about his parents and grandparents, and almost all in answer to my questions. You are so good, so just—you have done everything you thought to be right. But it seems to me clear that more than that is right, and I must speak about it since I am the person who would get what is called benefit by that 'more' not being done."

There was a perceptible pause before Mr. Casaubon replied, not quickly as before, but with a still more biting emphasis.

"Dorothea, my love, this is not the first occasion, but it were well that it should be the last, on which you have assumed a judgement on subjects beyond your scope. Into the question how far conduct, especially in the matter of alliances, constitutes a forfeiture of family claims, I do not now enter. Suffice it that you are not here qualified to discriminate. What

I now wish you to understand is that I accept no revision, still less dictation, within that range of affairs which I have deliberated upon as distinctly and properly mine. It is not for you to interfere between me and Mr. Ladislaw, and still less to encourage communications from him to you which constitute a criticism on my procedure."

Poor Dorothea, shrouded in the darkness, was in a tumult of conflicting emotions. Alarm at the possible effect on himself of her husband's strongly manifested anger would have checked any expression of her own resentment even if she had been quite free from doubt and compunction under the consciousness that there might be some justice in his last insinuation. Hearing him breathe quickly after he had spoken, she sat listening, frightened, wretched—with a dumb inward cry for help to bear this nightmare of a life in which every energy was arrested by dread. But nothing else happened except that they both remained a long while sleepless, without speaking again.

The next day Mr. Casaubon received the following answer from Will Ladislaw:

Dear Mr. Casaubon, I have given all due consideration to your letter of yesterday, but I am unable to take precisely your view of our mutual position. With the fullest acknowledgement of your generous conduct to me in the past, I must still maintain that an obligation of this kind cannot fairly fetter me as you appear to expect that it should. Granted that a benefactor's wishes may constitute a claim, there must always be a reservation as to the quality of those wishes. They may possibly clash with more imperative considerations. Or a benefactor's veto might impose such a negation on a man's life that the consequent blank might be more cruel than the benefaction was generous. I am merely using strong illustrations. In the present case I am unable to take your view of the bearing which my acceptance of occupation—not enriching certainly, but not dishonourable—will have on your own position, which seems to me too substantial to be affected in that shadowy manner. And though I do not believe that any change in our relations will occur (certainly none has yet occurred) which can nullify the obligations imposed on me by the past, pardon me for not seeing that those obligations should restrain me from using the ordinary freedom of living where I choose and maintaining myself by any lawful occupation I may choose. Regretting that there exists this difference between us as to a relation in which the conferring of benefits has been entirely on your side, I remain, yours with persistent obligation,

Will Ladislaw

Poor Mr. Casaubon felt (and must not we, being impartial, feel with him a little?) that no man had juster cause for disgust and suspicion than he. Young Ladislaw, he was sure, meant to defy and annoy him, meant to win Dorothea's confidence and sow her mind with disrespect, and perhaps aversion, towards her husband. Some motive beneath the surface had been needed to account for Will's sudden change of course in rejecting Mr. Casaubon's aid and quitting his travels; and this defiant determination to fix himself in the neighbourhood by taking up something so much at variance with his former choice as Mr. Brooke's Middlemarch projects revealed clearly enough that the undeclared motive had relation to Dorothea. Not for one moment did Mr. Casaubon suspect Dorothea of any doubleness: he had no suspicions of her, but he had (what was little less uncomfortable) the positive knowledge that her tendency to form opinions about her husband's conduct was accompanied with a disposition to regard Will Ladislaw favourably and be influenced by what he said. His own proud reticence had prevented him from ever being undeceived in the supposition that Dorothea had originally asked her uncle to invite Will to his house.

And now, on receiving Will's letter, Mr. Casaubon had to consider his duty. He would never have been easy to call his action anything else than duty, but in this case, contending motives thrust him back into negations.

Should he apply directly to Mr. Brooke, and demand of that troublesome gentleman to revoke his proposal? Or should he consult Sir James Chettam and get him to concur in remonstrance against a step which touched the whole family? In either case Mr. Casaubon was aware that failure was just as probable as success. It was impossible for him to mention Dorothea's name in the matter, and without some alarming urgency Mr. Brooke was as likely as not, after meeting all representations with apparent assent, to wind up by saying, "Never fear, Casaubon! Depend upon it, young Ladislaw will do you credit. Depend upon it, I have put my finger on the right thing." And Mr. Casaubon shrank nervously from communicating on the subject with Sir James Chettam, between whom and himself there had never been any cordiality and who would immediately think of Dorothea without any mention of her.

Poor Mr. Casaubon was distrustful of everybody's feeling towards him, especially as a husband. To let anyone suppose that he was jealous would be to admit their (suspected) view of his disadvantages; to let them know that he did not find marriage particularly blissful would imply his conversion to their (probably) earlier disapproval. It would be as bad as letting Carp, and Brasenose generally, know how backward he was in organizing the matter for his *Key to All Mythologies*. All through his life Mr. Casaubon had been trying not to admit even to himself the inward sores of self-doubt and jealousy. And on the most delicate of all personal subjects, the habit of proud, suspicious reticence told doubly.

Thus Mr. Casaubon remained proudly, bitterly silent. But he had forbidden Will to come to Lowick Manor, and he was mentally preparing other measures of frustration.

CHAPTER 38

C'est beaucoup que le jugement des hommes sur les actions humaines; tôt ou tard il devient efficace.

—GUIZOT

Sir James Chettam could not look with any satisfaction on Mr. Brooke's new courses, but it was easier to object than to hinder. Sir James accounted for his having come in alone one day to lunch with the Cadwalladers by saying, "I can't talk to you as I want, before Celia; it might hurt her. Indeed, it would not be right."

"I know what you mean—the *Pioneer* at the Grange!" darted in Mrs. Cadwallader almost before the last word was off her friend's tongue. "It is frightful—this taking to buying whistles and blowing them in everybody's hearing. Lying in bed all day and playing at dominoes, like poor Lord Plessy, would be more private and bearable."

"I see they are beginning to attack our friend Brooke in the *Trumpet*," said the rector, lounging back and smiling easily as he would have done if he had been attacked himself. "There are tremendous sarcasms against a landlord not a hundred miles from Middlemarch who receives his own rents and makes no returns."

"I do wish Brooke would leave that off," said Sir James with his little frown of annoyance.

"Is he really going to be put in nomination, though?" said Mr. Cadwallader. "I saw Farebrother yesterday—he's Whiggish himself, hoists Brougham and Useful Knowledge; that's the worst I know of him—and he says that Brooke is getting up a pretty strong party. Bulstrode, the banker, is his foremost man. But he thinks Brooke would come off badly at a nomination."

"Exactly," said Sir James with earnestness. "I have been inquiring into the thing, for I've never known anything about Middlemarch politics before, the county being my business. What Brooke trusts to is that they are going to turn out Oliver because he is a Peelite. But Hawley tells me that if they send up a Whig at all it is sure to be Bagster, one of those candidates who come from heaven knows where, but dead against ministers, and an experienced parliamentary man. Hawley's rather rough; he forgot that he was speaking to me. He said if Brooke wanted a pelting, he could get it cheaper than by going to the hustings."

"I warned you all of it," said Mrs. Cadwallader, waving her hands outward. "I said to Humphrey long ago, Mr. Brooke is going to make a splash in the mud. And now he has done it."

"Well, he might have taken it into his head to marry," said the rector. "That would have been a graver mess than a little flirtation with politics."

"He may do that afterwards," said Mrs. Cadwallader, "when he has come out on the other side of the mud with an ague."

"What I care for most is his own dignity," said Sir James. "Of course I care the more because of the family. But he's getting on in life now, and I don't like to think of his exposing himself. They will be raking up everything against him."

"I suppose it's no use trying any persuasion," said the rector. "There's such an odd mixture of obstinacy and changeableness in Brooke. Have you tried him on the subject?"

"Well, no," said Sir James; "I feel a delicacy in appearing to dictate. But I have been talking to this young Ladislaw that Brooke is making a factotum of. Ladislaw seems clever enough for anything. I thought it as well to hear what he had to say, and he is against Brooke's standing this time. I think he'll turn him round; I think the nomination may be staved off."

"I know," said Mrs. Cadwallader, nodding. "The independent member hasn't got his speeches well enough by heart."

"But this Ladislaw—there again is a vexatious business," said Sir James. "We have had him two or three times to dine at the hall (you have met him, by the by) as Brooke's guest and a relation of Casaubon's, thinking he was only on a flying visit. And now I find he's in everybody's mouth in Middlemarch as the editor of the *Pioneer*. There are stories going about him as a quill-driving alien, a foreign emissary, and what not."

"Casaubon won't like that," said the rector.

"There *is* some foreign blood in Ladislaw," returned Sir James. "I hope he won't go into extreme opinions and carry Brooke on."

"Oh, he's a dangerous young sprig, that Mr. Ladislaw," said Mrs. Cadwallader, "with his opera songs and his ready tongue. A sort of Byronic hero—an amorous conspirator, it strikes me. And Thomas Aquinas is not fond of him. I could see that, the day the picture was brought."

"I don't like to begin on the subject with Casaubon," said Sir James. "He has more right to interfere than I. But it's a disagreeable affair all round. What a character for anybody with decent connexions to show himself in—one of those newspaper fellows! You have only to look at Keck, who manages the *Trumpet*. I saw him the other day with Hawley. His writing is sound enough, I believe, but he's such a low fellow that I wished he had been on the wrong side."

"What can you expect with these peddling Middlemarch papers?" said the rector. "I don't suppose you could get a high style of man anywhere to be writing up interests he doesn't really care about, and for pay that hardly keeps him in at elbows."

"Exactly; that makes it so annoying that Brooke should have put a man who has a sort of connexion with the family in a position of that kind. For my part, I think Ladislaw is rather a fool for accepting."

"It is Aquinas's fault," said Mrs. Cadwallader. "Why didn't he use his interest to get Ladislaw made an *attaché* or sent to India? That is how families get rid of troublesome sprigs."

"There is no knowing to what lengths the mischief may go," said Sir James anxiously. "But if Casaubon says nothing, what can I do?"

"Oh, my dear Sir James," said the rector, "don't let us make too much of all this. It is likely enough to end in mere smoke. After a month or two Brooke and this Master Ladislaw will get tired of each other; Ladislaw will take wing; Brooke will sell the *Pioneer*; and everything will settle down again as usual."

"There is one good chance—that he will not like to feel his money oozing away," said Mrs. Cadwallader. "If I knew the items of election expenses I could scare him. It's no use plying him with wide words like expenditure: I wouldn't talk of phlebotomy, I would empty a pot of leeches upon him. What we good stingy people don't like is having our sixpences sucked away from us."

"And he will not like having things raked up against him," said Sir James. "There is the management of his estate. They have begun upon that already. And it really is painful for me to see. It is a nuisance under one's very nose. I do think one is bound to do the best for one's land and tenants, especially in these hard times."

"Perhaps the *Trumpet* may rouse him to make a change, and some good may come of it all," said the rector. "I know I should be glad. I should hear less grumbling when my tithe is paid. I don't know what I should do if there were not a modus in Tipton."

"I want him to have a proper man to look after things—I want him to take on Garth again," said Sir James. "He got rid of Garth twelve years ago, and everything has been going wrong since. I think of getting Garth to manage for me—he has made such a capital plan for my buildings; and Lovegood is hardly up to the mark. But Garth would not undertake the Tipton estate again unless Brooke left it entirely to him."

"In the right of it too," said the rector. "Garth is an independent fellow, an original, simple-minded fellow. One day when he was doing some valuation for me, he told me point-blank that clergymen seldom understood anything about business and did mischief when they meddled; but he said it as quietly and respectfully as if he had been talking to me about sailors. He would make a different parish of Tipton if Brooke would let him manage. I wish, by the help of the *Trumpet*, you could bring that round."

"If Dorothea had kept near her uncle, there would have been some chance," said Sir James. "She might have got some power over him in time, and she was always uneasy about the estate. She had wonderfully good notions about such things. But now Casaubon takes her up entirely. Celia complains a good deal. We can hardly get her to dine with us since he had that fit." Sir James ended with a look of pitying disgust, and Mrs. Cadwallader shrugged her shoulders as much as to say that *she* was not likely to see anything new in that direction.

"Poor Casaubon!" the rector said. "That was a nasty attack. I thought he looked shattered the other day at the archdeacon's."

"In point of fact," resumed Sir James, not choosing to dwell on "fits," "Brooke doesn't mean badly by his tenants or anyone else, but he has got that way of paring and clipping at expenses."

"Come, that's a blessing," said Mrs. Cadwallader. "That helps him to find himself in a morning. He may not know his own opinions, but he does know his own pocket."

"I don't believe a man is in pocket by stinginess on his land," said Sir James.

"Oh, stinginess may be abused like other virtues; it will not do to keep one's own pigs lean," said Mrs. Cadwallader, who had risen to look out of the window. "But talk of an independent politician and he will appear."

"What, Brooke?" said her husband.

"Yes. Now, you ply him with the *Trumpet*, Humphrey, and I will put the leeches on him. What will you do, Sir James?"

"The fact is, I don't like to begin about it with Brooke, in our mutual position; the whole thing is so unpleasant. I do wish people would behave like gentlemen," said the good baronet, feeling that this was a simple and comprehensive program for social well-being.

"Here you all are, eh?" said Mr. Brooke, shuffling round and shaking hands. "I was going up to the hall by and by, Chettam. But it's pleasant to find everybody, you know. Well, what do you think of things? Going on a little fast! It was true enough, what Lafitte said—'Since yesterday, a century has passed away.' They're in the next century, you know, on the other side of the water. Going on faster than we are."

"Why, yes," said the rector, taking up a newspaper. "Here is the *Trumpet* accusing you of lagging behind—did you see?"

"Eh? No," said Mr. Brooke, dropping his gloves into his hat and hastily adjusting his eyeglass. But Mr. Cadwallader kept the paper in his hand, saying with a smile in his eyes, "Look here! All this is about a landlord not a hundred miles from Middlemarch who receives his own rents. They say he is the most retrogressive man in the county. I think you must have taught them that word in the *Pioneer*."

"Oh, that is Keck—an illiterate fellow, you know. Retrogressive, now! Come, that's capital. He thinks it means destructive: they want to make me out a destructive, you know," said Mr. Brooke with that cheerfulness which is usually sustained by an adversary's ignorance.

"I think he knows the meaning of the word. Here is a sharp stroke or two. *If we had to describe a man who is retrogressive in the most evil sense of the word, we should say he is one who would dub himself a reformer of our constitution, while every interest for which he is immediately responsible is going to decay; a philanthropist who cannot bear one rogue to be hanged, but does not mind five honest tenants being half starved; a man who shrieks at corruption, and keeps his farms at rack-rent; who roars himself red at rotten boroughs, and does not mind if every field on his farms has a rotten gate; a man very open-hearted to Leeds and Manchester, no doubt; he would give any number of representatives who will pay for their seats out of their own pockets: what he objects to giving is a little return on rent-days to help a tenant to buy stock, or an outlay on repairs to keep the weather out at a tenant's barn-door or make his house look a little less like an Irish cottier's. But we all know the wag's definition of a philanthropist: a man whose charity increases directly as the square of the distance.* And so on. All the rest is to show what sort of legislator a philanthropist is likely to make," ended the rector, throwing down the paper and clasping his hands at the back of his

head, while he looked at Mr. Brooke with an air of amused neutrality.

"Come, that's rather good, you know," said Mr. Brooke, taking up the paper and trying to bear the attack as easily as his neighbour did, but colouring and smiling rather nervously; "that about roaring himself red at rotten boroughs—I never made a speech about rotten boroughs in my life. And as to roaring myself red and that kind of thing—these men never understand what is good satire. Satire, you know, should be true up to a certain point. I recollect they said that in *The Edinburgh* somewhere—it must be true up to a certain point."

"Well, that is really a hit about the gates," said Sir James, anxious to tread carefully. "Dagley complained to me the other day that he hadn't got a decent gate on his farm. Garth has invented a new pattern of gate—I wish you would try it. One ought to use some of one's timber in that way."

"You go in for fancy farming, you know, Chettam," said Mr. Brooke, appearing to glance over the columns of the *Trumpet*. "That's your hobby, and you don't mind the expense."

"I thought the most expensive hobby in the world was standing for Parliament," said Mrs. Cadwallader. "They said the last unsuccessful candidate at Middlemarch—Giles, wasn't his name?—spent ten thousand pounds and failed because he did not bribe enough. What a bitter reflection for a man!"

"Somebody was saying," said the rector laughingly, "that East Retford was nothing to Middlemarch, for bribery."

"Nothing of the kind," said Mr. Brooke. "The Tories bribe, you know; Hawley and his set bribe with treating, hot codlings, and that sort of thing, and they bring the voters drunk to the poll. But they are not going to have it their own way in future—not in future, you know. Middlemarch is a little backward, I admit—the freemen are a little backward. But we shall educate them; we shall bring them on, you know. The best people there are on our side."

"Hawley says you have men on your side who will do you harm," remarked Sir James. "He says Bulstrode, the banker, will do you harm."

"And that if you got pelted," interposed Mrs. Cadwallader, "half the rotten eggs would mean hatred of your committee-man. Good heavens! Think what it must be to be pelted for wrong opinions. And I seem to remember a story of a man they pretended to chair and let him fall into a dust-heap on purpose!"

"Pelting is nothing to their finding holes in one's coat," said the rector. "I confess that's what I should be afraid of if we parsons had to stand at the hustings for preferment. I should be afraid of their reckoning up all my fishing days. Upon my word, I think the truth is the hardest missile one can be pelted with."

"The fact is," said Sir James, "if a man goes into public life he must be prepared for the consequences. He must make himself proof against calumny."

"My dear Chettam, that is all very fine, you know," said Mr. Brooke. "But how will you make yourself proof against calumny? You should read history—look at ostracism, persecution, martyrdom, and that kind of thing. They always happen to the best men, you know. But what is that in Horace? *Fiat justitia, ruat* . . . something or other."

"Exactly," said Sir James with a little more heat than usual. "What I mean by being proof against calumny is being able to point to the fact as a contradiction."

"And it is not martyrdom to pay bills that one has run into one's self," said Mrs. Cadwallader.

But it was Sir James's evident annoyance that most stirred Mr. Brooke. "Well, you know, Chettam," he said, rising, taking up his hat, and leaning on his stick, "you and I have a different system. You are all for outlay with your farms. I don't want to make out that my system is good under all circumstances—under all circumstances, you know."

"There ought to be a new valuation made from time to time," said Sir James. "Returns are very well occasionally, but I like a fair valuation. What do you say, Cadwallader?"

"I agree with you. If I were Brooke, I would choke the *Trumpet* at once by getting Garth to make a new valuation of the farms and giving him carte blanche about gates and repairs: that's my view of the political situation," said the rector, broadening himself by sticking his thumbs in his arm-holes and laughing towards Mr. Brooke.

"That's a showy sort of thing to do, you know," said Mr. Brooke. "But I should like you to tell me of another landlord who has distressed his tenants for arrears as little as I have. I let the old tenants stay on. I'm uncommonly easy, let me tell you—uncommonly easy. I have my own ideas, and I take my stand on them, you know. A man who does that is always charged with eccentricity, inconsistency, and that kind of thing. When I change my line of action, I shall follow my own ideas."

After that, Mr. Brooke remembered that there was a packet which he had omitted to send off from the Grange, and he bade everybody hurriedly good-bye.

"I didn't want to take a liberty with Brooke," said Sir James; "I see he is nettled. But as to what he says about old tenants, in point of fact no new tenant would take the farms on the present terms."

"I have a notion that he will be brought round in time," said the rector. "But you were pulling one way, Elinor, and we were pulling another. You wanted to frighten him away from expense, and we want to frighten him into it. Better let him try to be popular and see that his character as a landlord stands in his way. I don't think it signifies two straws about the *Pioneer*, or Ladislaw, or Brooke's speechifying to the Middlemarchers. But it does signify about the parishioners in Tipton being comfortable."

"Excuse me, it is you two who are on the wrong track," said Mrs. Cadwallader. "You should have proved to him that he loses money by bad management, and then we should all have pulled together. If you put him a-horseback on politics, I warn you of the consequences. It was all very well to ride on sticks at home and call them ideas."

CHAPTER 39

If, as I have, you also doe,
Vertue attired in woman see,
And dare love that, and say so too,
And forget the He and She;
And if this love, though placed so,
From prophane men you hide,
Which will no faith on this bestow,
Or, if they doe, deride:
Then you have done a braver thing
Than all the Worthies did,
And a braver thence will spring,
Which is, to keep that hid.

—DR. DONNE

Sir James Chettam's mind was not fruitful in devices, but his growing anxiety to "act on Brooke," once brought close to his constant belief in Dorothea's capacity for influence, became formative and issued in a little plan, namely, to plead Celia's indisposition as a reason for fetching Dorothea by herself to the hall, and to leave her at the Grange with the carriage on the way after making her fully aware of the situation concerning the management of the estate.

In this way it happened that one day near four o'clock, when Mr. Brooke and Ladislaw were seated in the library, the door opened and Mrs. Casaubon was announced.

Will, the moment before, had been low in the depths of boredom, and obliged to help Mr. Brooke in arranging "documents" about hanging sheep-stealers, was exemplifying the power our minds have of riding several horses at once by inwardly arranging measures towards getting a lodging for himself in Middlemarch and cutting short his constant residence at the Grange, while there flitted through all these steadier images a tickling vision of a sheep-stealing epic written with Homeric particularity. When Mrs. Casaubon was announced he started up as from an electric shock and felt a tingling at his finger-ends. Anyone observing him would have seen a change in his complexion, in the adjustment of his facial muscles, in the vividness of his glance, which might have made them imagine that every molecule in his body had passed the message of a magic touch. And so it had. For effective magic is transcendent nature; and who shall measure the subtlety of those touches which convey the quality of soul as well as body, and make a man's passion for one woman differ from his passion for another as joy in the morning light over valley and river and white mountain-top differs from joy among Chinese lanterns and glass panels? Will, too, was made of very impressible stuff. The bow of a violin drawn near him cleverly would at one stroke change the aspect of the world for him, and his point of view shifted as easily as his mood. Dorothea's entrance was the freshness of morning.

"Well, my dear, this is pleasant, now," said Mr. Brooke, meeting and kissing her. "You have left Casaubon with his books, I suppose. That's right. We must not have you getting too learned for a woman, you know."

"There is no fear of that, Uncle," said Dorothea, turning to Will and shaking hands with open cheerfulness, while she made no other form of greeting, but went on answering her uncle. "I am very slow. When I want to be busy with books, I am often playing truant among my thoughts. I find it is not so easy to be learned as to plan cottages."

She seated herself beside her uncle opposite to Will and was evidently preoccupied with something that made her almost unmindful of him. He was ridiculously disappointed, as if he had imagined that her coming had anything to do with him.

"Why, yes, my dear, it was quite your hobby to draw plans. But it was good to break that off a little. Hobbies are apt to run away with us, you know; it doesn't do to be run away with. We must keep the reins. I have never let myself be run away with; I always pulled up. That is what I tell Ladislaw. He and I are alike, you know: he likes to go into everything. We are working at capital punishment. We shall do a great deal together, Ladislaw and I."

"Yes," said Dorothea with characteristic directness, "Sir James has been telling me that he is in hope of seeing a great change made soon in your management of the estate—that you are thinking of having the farms valued, and repairs made, and the cottages improved, so that Tipton may look quite another place. Oh, how happy!" she went on, clasping her hands, with a return to that more childlike, impetuous manner which had been subdued since her marriage. "If I were at home still, I should take to riding again, that I might go about with you and see all that! And you are going to engage Mr. Garth, who praised my cottages, Sir James says."

"Chettam is a little hasty, my dear," said Mr. Brooke, colouring slightly. "A little hasty, you know. I never said I should do anything of the kind. I never said I should *not* do it, you know."

"He only feels confident that you will do it," said Dorothea in a voice as clear and unhesitating as that of a young chorister chanting a credo, "because you mean to enter Parliament as a member who cares for the improvement of the people, and one of the first things to be made better is the state of the land and the labourers. Think of Kit Downes, Uncle, who lives with his wife and seven children in a house with one sitting-room and one bedroom hardly larger than this table! And those poor Dagleys, in their tumble-down farmhouse, where they live in the back kitchen and leave the other rooms to the rats! That is one reason why I did not like the pictures here, dear Uncle—which you think me stupid about. I used to come from the village with all that dirt and coarse ugliness like a pain within me, and the simpering pictures in the

drawing-room seemed to me like a wicked attempt to find delight in what is false, while we don't mind how hard the truth is for the neighbours outside our walls. I think we have no right to come forward and urge wider changes for good until we have tried to alter the evils which lie under our own hands."

Dorothea had gathered emotion as she went on and had forgotten everything except the relief of pouring forth her feelings unchecked, an experience once habitual with her, but hardly ever present since her marriage, which had been a perpetual struggle of energy with fear. For the moment Will's admiration was accompanied with a chilling sense of remoteness. A man is seldom ashamed of feeling that he cannot love a woman so well when he sees a certain greatness in her, Nature having intended greatness for men. But Nature has sometimes made sad oversights in carrying out her intention, as in the case of good Mr. Brooke, whose masculine consciousness was at this moment in rather a stammering condition under the eloquence of his niece. He could not immediately find any other mode of expressing himself than that of rising, fixing his eyeglass, and fingering the papers before him. At last he said, "There is something in what you say, my dear, something in what you say—but not everything—eh, Ladislaw? You and I don't like our pictures and statues being found fault with. Young ladies are a little ardent, you know—a little one-sided, my dear. Fine art, poetry, that kind of thing, elevates a nation—*emollit mores*—you understand a little Latin now. But—eh, what?"

These interrogatives were addressed to the footman who had come in to say that the keeper had found one of Dagley's boys with a leveret in his hand just killed.

"I'll come, I'll come. I shall let him off easily, you know," said Mr. Brooke, aside to Dorothea, shuffling away very cheerfully.

"I hope you feel how right this change is that I—that Sir James wishes for," said Dorothea to Will as soon as her uncle was gone.

"I do, now I have heard you speak about it. I shall not forget what you have said. But can you think of something else at this moment? I may not have another opportunity of speaking to you about what has occurred," said Will, rising with a movement of impatience and holding the back of his chair with both hands.

"Pray tell me what it is," said Dorothea anxiously, also rising and going to the open window, where Monk was looking in, panting and wagging his tail. She leaned her back against the window-frame and laid her hand on the dog's head; for though, as we know, she was not fond of pets that must be held in the hands or trodden on, she was always attentive to the feelings of dogs, and very polite if she had to decline their advances.

Will followed her only with his eyes and said, "I presume you know that Mr. Casaubon has forbidden me to go to his house."

"No, I did not," said Dorothea after a moment's pause. She was evidently much moved. "I am very, very sorry," she added mournfully. She was thinking of what Will had no knowledge of—the conversation between her and her husband in the darkness; and she was anew smitten with hopelessness that she could influence Mr. Casaubon's action. But the marked expression of her sorrow convinced Will that it was not all given to him personally and that Dorothea had not been visited by the idea that Mr. Casaubon's dislike and jealousy of him turned upon herself. He felt an odd mixture of delight and vexation: of delight that he could dwell and be cherished in her thought as in a pure home, without suspicion and without stint; of vexation because he was of too little account with her, was not formidable enough, was treated with an unhesitating benevolence which did not flatter him. But his dread of any change in Dorothea was stronger than his discontent, and he began to speak again in a tone of mere explanation.

"Mr. Casaubon's reason is his displeasure at my taking a position here which he considers unsuited to my rank as his cousin. I have told him that I cannot give way on this point. It is a little too hard on me to expect that my course in life is to be hampered by prejudices which I think ridiculous. Obligation may be stretched till it is no better than a brand of slavery stamped on us when we were too young to know its meaning. I would not have accepted the position if I had not meant to make it useful and honourable. I am not bound to regard family dignity in any other light."

Dorothea felt wretched. She thought her husband altogether in the wrong, on more grounds than Will had mentioned.

"It is better for us not to speak on the subject," she said with a tremulousness not common in her voice, "since you and Mr. Casaubon disagree. You intend to remain?" She was looking out on the lawn with melancholy meditation.

"Yes; but I shall hardly ever see you now," said Will in a tone of almost boyish complaint.

"No," said Dorothea, turning her eyes full upon him, "hardly ever. But I shall hear of you. I shall know what you are doing for my uncle."

"I shall know hardly anything about you," said Will. "No one will tell me anything."

"Oh, my life is very simple," said Dorothea, her lips curling with an exquisite smile, which irradiated her melancholy. "I am always at Lowick."

"That is a dreadful imprisonment," said Will impetuously.

"No, don't think that," said Dorothea. "I have no longings."

He did not speak, but she replied to some change in his expression. "I mean, for myself. Except that I should like not to have so much more than my share without doing anything for others. But I have a belief of my own, and it comforts me."

"What is that?" said Will, rather jealous of the belief.

"That by desiring what is perfectly good, even when we don't quite know what it is and cannot do what we would, we are part of the Divine power against evil—widening the skirts of light and making the struggle with darkness narrower."

"That is a beautiful mysticism, it is a—"

"Please not to call it by any name," said Dorothea, putting out her hands entreatingly. "You will say it is Persian, or something else geographical. It is my life. I have found it out and cannot part with it. I have always been finding out my religion since I was a little girl. I used to pray so much—now I hardly ever pray. I try not to have desires merely for myself, because they may not be good for others, and I have too much already. I only told you that you might know quite well how my days go at Lowick."

"God bless you for telling me!" said Will ardently, and rather wondering at himself. They were looking at each other like two fond children who were talking confidentially of birds.

"What is *your* religion?" said Dorothea. "I mean—not what you know about religion, but the belief that helps you most?"

"To love what is good and beautiful when I see it," said Will. "But I am a rebel: I don't feel bound, as you do, to submit to what I don't like."

"But if you like what is good, that comes to the same thing," said Dorothea, smiling.

"Now you are subtle," said Will.

"Yes; Mr. Casaubon often says I am too subtle. I don't feel as if I were subtle," said Dorothea playfully. "But how long my uncle is! I must go and look for him. I must really go on to the hall. Celia is expecting me."

Will offered to tell Mr. Brooke, who presently came and said that he would step into the carriage and go with Dorothea as far as Dagley's to speak about the small delinquent who had been caught with the leveret. Dorothea renewed the subject of the estate as they drove along, but Mr. Brooke, not being taken unawares, got the talk under his own control.

"Chettam, now," he replied; "he finds fault with me, my dear; but I should not preserve my game if it were not for Chettam, and he can't say that *that* expense is for the sake of the tenants, you know. It's a little against my feeling—poaching, now, if you come to look into it; I have often thought of getting up the subject. Not long ago, Flavell, the Methodist preacher, was brought up for knocking down a hare that came across his path when he and his wife were walking out together. He was pretty quick and knocked it on the neck."

"That was very brutal, I think," said Dorothea.

"Well, now, it seemed rather black to me, I confess, in a Methodist preacher, you know. And Johnson said, 'You may judge what a hypocrite he is.' And upon my word, I thought Flavell looked very little like 'the highest style of man'—as somebody calls the Christian—Young, the poet Young, I think—you know Young? Well, now, Flavell in his shabby black gaiters, pleading that he thought the Lord had sent him and his wife a good dinner, and he had a right to knock it down, though not a mighty hunter before the Lord, as Nimrod was—I assure you it was rather comic: Fielding would have made something of it—or Scott, now—Scott might have worked it up. But really, when I came to think of it, I couldn't help liking that the fellow should have a bit of hare to say grace over. It's all a matter of prejudice—prejudice, with the law on its side, you know—about the stick and the gaiters, and so on. However, it doesn't do to reason about things, and law is law. But I got Johnson to be quiet, and I hushed the matter up. I doubt whether Chettam would not have been more severe, and yet he comes down on me as if I were the hardest man in the county. But here we are at Dagley's."

Mr. Brooke got down at a farmyard-gate, and Dorothea drove on. It is wonderful how much uglier things will look when we only suspect that we are blamed for them. Even our own persons in the glass are apt to change their aspect for us after we have heard some frank remark on their less admirable points; and on the other hand it is astonishing how pleasantly conscience takes our encroachments on those who never complain or have nobody to complain for them. Dagley's homestead never before looked so dismal to Mr. Brooke as it did today, with his mind thus sore about the fault-finding of the *Trumpet*, echoed by Sir James.

It is true that an observer, under that softening influence of the fine arts which makes other people's hardships picturesque, might have been delighted with this homestead called Freeman's End: the old house had dormer-windows in the dark-red roof, two of the chimneys were choked with ivy, the large porch was blocked up with bundles of sticks, and half the windows were closed with grey worm-eaten shutters about which the jasmine-boughs grew in wild luxuriance; the mouldering garden wall with hollyhocks peeping over it was a perfect study of highly mingled subdued colour, and there was an aged goat (kept doubtless on interesting superstitious grounds) lying against the open back-kitchen door. The mossy thatch of the cow-shed, the broken grey barn-doors, the pauper labourers in ragged breeches who had nearly finished unloading a waggon of corn into the barn ready for early thrashing; the scanty dairy of cows being tethered for milking and leaving one half of the shed in brown emptiness; the very pigs and white ducks seeming to wander about the uneven, neglected yard as if in low spirits from feeding on a too meagre quality of rinsings—all these objects under the quiet light of a sky marbled with high clouds would have made a sort of picture which we have all paused over as a "charming bit," touching other sensibilities than those which are stirred by the depression of the agricultural interest, with the sad lack of farming capital, as seen constantly in the newspapers of that time. But these troublesome associations were just now strongly present to Mr. Brooke and spoiled the scene for him. Mr. Dagley himself made a figure in the landscape, carrying a pitchfork and wearing his milking-hat—a very old beaver flattened in front. His coat and breeches were the best he had, and he would not have been wearing them on this week-day occasion if he had not been to market and returned later than usual, having given himself the rare treat of dining at the public table of the Blue Bull. How he came to fall into this extravagance would perhaps be matter of wonderment to himself on the morrow; but before dinner something in the state of the country, a slight pause in the harvest before the Far Dips were cut, the stories about the new king and the numerous handbills on the walls, had seemed to warrant a little recklessness. It was a maxim about Middlemarch, and regarded as self-evident, that good meat should have good drink, which last Dagley interpreted as plenty of table ale well followed up by rum-and-water. These liquors have so far truth in them that they were not false enough to make poor Dagley seem merry; they only made his discontent less tongue-tied than usual. He had also taken too much in the shape of muddy political talk, a stimulant dangerously disturbing to his farming conservatism, which consisted in holding that whatever is, is bad, and any change is likely to be worse. He was flushed, and his eyes had a decidedly quarrelsome stare as he stood still grasping his pitchfork, while the landlord approached with his easy, shuffling walk, one hand in his trouser pocket and the other swinging round a thin walking-stick.

"Dagley, my good fellow," began Mr. Brooke, conscious that he was going to be very friendly about the boy.

"Oh, ay, I'm a good feller, am I? Thank ye, sir, thank ye," said Dagley with a loud, snarling irony which made Fag, the sheep-dog, stir from his seat and prick his ears; but seeing Monk enter the yard after some outside loitering, Fag seated himself again in an attitude of observation. "I'm glad to hear I'm a good feller."

Mr. Brooke reflected that it was market-day and that his worthy tenant had probably been dining, but saw no reason why he should not go on, since he could take the precaution of repeating what he had to say to Mrs. Dagley.

"Your little lad Jacob has been caught killing a leveret, Dagley; I have told Johnson to lock him up in the empty stable an hour or two, just to frighten him, you know. But he will be brought home by and by, before night; and you'll just look

after him, will you, and give him a reprimand, you know?"

"No, I woon't; I'll be dee'd if I'll leather my boy to please you or anybody else, not if you was twenty landlords istid o'one, and that a bad un."

Dagley's words were loud enough to summon his wife to the back-kitchen door—the only entrance ever used, and one always open except in bad weather—and Mr. Brooke, saying soothingly, "Well, well, I'll speak to your wife; I didn't mean beating, you know," turned to walk to the house. But Dagley, only the more inclined to "have his say" with a gentleman who walked away from him, followed at once, with Fag slouching at his heels and sullenly evading some small and probably charitable advances on the part of Monk.

"How do you do, Mrs. Dagley?" said Mr. Brooke, making some haste. "I came to tell you about your boy; I don't want you to give him the stick, you know." He was careful to speak quite plainly this time.

Overworked Mrs. Dagley—a thin, worn woman, from whose life pleasure had so entirely vanished that she had not even any Sunday clothes which could give her satisfaction in preparing for church—had already had a misunderstanding with her husband since he had come home and was in low spirits, expecting the worst. But her husband was beforehand in answering.

"No, nor he woon't hev the stick, whether you want it or no," pursued Dagley, throwing out his voice as if he wanted it to hit hard. "You've got no call to come an' talk about sticks o' these primises, as you woon't give a stick tow'rt mending. Go to Middlemarch to ax for *your* charrickter."

"You'd better hold your tongue, Dagley," said the wife, "and not kick your own trough over. When a man as is father of a family has been an' spent money at market and made himself the worse for liquor, he's done enough mischief for one day. But I should like to know what my boy's done, sir."

"Niver do you mind what he's done," said Dagley more fiercely; "it's my business to speak, an' not yourn. An' I wull speak, too. I'll hev my say—supper or no. An' what I say is, as I've lived upo' your ground from my father and grandfather afore me, an' hev dropped our money into't, an' me an' my children might lie an' rot on the ground for top-dressin' as we can't find the money to buy, if the king wasn't to put a stop."

"My good fellow, you're drunk, you know," said Mr. Brooke confidentially but not judiciously. "Another day, another day," he added, turning as if to go.

But Dagley immediately fronted him, and Fag at his heels growled low, as his master's voice grew louder and more insulting, while Monk also drew close in silent, dignified watch. The labourers on the waggon were pausing to listen, and it seemed wiser to be quite passive than to attempt a ridiculous flight pursued by a bawling man.

"I'm no more drunk nor you are, nor so much," said Dagley. "I can carry my liquor, an' I know what I meean. An' I meean as the king 'ull put a stop to't, for them say it as knows it, as there's to be a Rinform, and them landlords as never done the right thing by their tenants 'ull be treated i' that way as they'll hev to scuttle off. An' there's them i' Middlemarch knows what the Rinform is—an' as knows who'll hev to scuttle. Says they, 'I know who *your* landlord is.' An' says I, 'I hope you're the better for knowin' him; I arn't.' Says they, 'He's a close-fisted un.' 'Ay, ay,' says I. 'He's a man for the Rinform,' says they. That's what they says. An' I made out what the Rinform were—an' it were to send you an' your likes a-scuttlin', an' wi' pretty strong-smellin' things too. An' you may do as you like now, for I'm none afeard on you. An' you'd better let my boy aloan, an' look to yoursen afore the Rinform has got upo' your back. That's what I'n got to say," concluded Mr. Dagley, striking his fork into the ground with a firmness which proved inconvenient as he tried to draw it up again.

At this last action Monk began to bark loudly, and it was a moment for Mr. Brooke to escape. He walked out of the yard as quickly as he could, in some amazement at the novelty of his situation. He had never been insulted on his own land before, and had been inclined to regard himself as a general favourite (we are all apt to do so when we think of our own amiability more than of what other people are likely to want of us). When he had quarrelled with Caleb Garth twelve years before he had thought that the tenants would be pleased at the landlord's taking everything into his own hands.

Some who follow the narrative of his experience may wonder at the midnight darkness of Mr. Dagley; but nothing was easier in those times than for an hereditary farmer of his grade to be ignorant, in spite somehow of having a rector in the twin parish who was a gentleman to the backbone, a curate nearer at hand who preached more learnedly than the rector, a landlord who had gone into everything, especially fine art and social improvement, and all the lights of Middlemarch only three miles off. As to the facility with which mortals escape knowledge, try an average acquaintance in the intellectual blaze of London, and consider what that eligible person for a dinner-party would have been if he had learned scant skill in "summing" from the parish-clerk of Tipton and read a chapter in the Bible with immense difficulty because such names as Isaiah or Apollos remained unmanageable after twice spelling. Poor Dagley read a few verses sometimes on a Sunday evening, and the world was at least not darker to him than it had been before. Some things he knew thoroughly, namely, the slovenly habits of farming and the awkwardness of weather, stock, and crops at Freeman's End—so called apparently by way of sarcasm, to imply that a man was free to quit if he chose but that there was no earthly "beyond" open to him.

CHAPTER 40

Wise in his daily work was he:
To fruits of diligence,
And not to faiths or polity,
He plied his utmost sense.
These perfect in their little parts,
Whose work is all their prize—
Without them how could laws, or arts,
Or towered cities rise?

In watching effects, if only of an electric battery, it is often necessary to change our place and examine a particular mixture or group at some distance from the point where the movement we are interested in was set up. The group I am moving towards is at Caleb Garth's breakfast-table in the large parlour where the maps and desk were: father, mother, and five of the children. Mary was just now at home waiting for a situation, while Christy, the boy next to her, was getting cheap learning and cheap fare in Scotland, having to his father's disappointment taken to books instead of that sacred calling "business."

The letters had come—nine costly letters, for which the postman had been paid three and twopence, and Mr. Garth was forgetting his tea and toast while he read his letters and laid them open one above the other, sometimes swaying his head slowly, sometimes screwing up his mouth in inward debate, but not forgetting to cut off a large red seal unbroken, which Letty snatched up like an eager terrier.

The talk among the rest went on unrestrainedly, for nothing disturbed Caleb's absorption except shaking the table when he was writing.

Two letters of the nine had been for Mary. After reading them, she had passed them to her mother and sat playing with her tea-spoon absently, till with a sudden recollection she returned to her sewing, which she had kept on her lap during breakfast.

"Oh, don't sew, Mary!" said Ben, pulling her arm down. "Make me a peacock with this bread-crumb." He had been kneading a small mass for the purpose.

"No, no, Mischief!" said Mary good-humouredly, while she pricked his hand lightly with her needle. "Try and mould it yourself; you have seen me do it often enough. I must get this sewing done. It is for Rosamond Vincy; she is to be married next week, and she can't be married without this handkerchief." Mary ended merrily, amused with the last notion.

"Why can't she, Mary?" said Letty, seriously interested in this mystery and pushing her head so close to her sister that Mary now turned the threatening needle toward Letty's nose.

"Because this is one of a dozen, and without it there would only be eleven," said Mary with a grave air of explanation, so that Letty sank back with a sense of knowledge.

"Have you made up your mind, my dear?" said Mrs. Garth, laying the letters down.

"I shall go to the school at York," said Mary. "I am less unfit to teach in a school than in a family. I like to teach classes best. And, you see, I must teach; there is nothing else to be done."

"Teaching seems to me the most delightful work in the world," said Mrs. Garth with a touch of rebuke in her tone. "I could understand your objection to it if you had not knowledge enough, Mary, or if you disliked children."

"I suppose we never quite understand why another dislikes what we like, Mother," said Mary rather curtly. "I am not fond of a schoolroom; I like the outside world better. It is a very inconvenient fault of mine."

"It must be very stupid to be always in a girls' school," said Alfred. "Such a set of nincompoops, like Mrs. Ballard's pupils walking two and two."

"And they have no games worth playing at," said Jim. "They can neither throw nor leap. I don't wonder at Mary's not liking it."

"What is that Mary doesn't like, eh?" said the father, looking over his spectacles and pausing before he opened his next letter.

"Being among a lot of nincompoop girls," said Alfred.

"Is it the situation you had heard of, Mary?" said Caleb gently, looking at his daughter.

"Yes, Father: the school at York. I have determined to take it. It is quite the best. Thirty-five pounds a year, and extra pay for teaching the smallest strummers at the piano."

"Poor child! I wish she could stay at home with us, Susan," said Caleb, looking plaintively at his wife.

"Mary would not be happy without doing her duty," said Mrs. Garth magisterially, conscious of having done her own.

"It wouldn't make me happy to do such a nasty duty as that," said Alfred, at which Mary and her father laughed silently, but Mrs. Garth said, gravely, "Do find a fitter word than nasty, my dear Alfred, for everything that you think disagreeable. And suppose that Mary could help you to go to Mr. Hanmer's with the money she gets?"

"That seems to me a great shame. But she's an old brick," said Alfred, rising from his chair and pulling Mary's head backward to kiss her.

Mary coloured and laughed but could not conceal that the tears were coming. Caleb, looking on over his spectacles, with the angles of his eyebrows falling, had an expression of mingled delight and sorrow as he returned to the opening of his letter; and even Mrs. Garth, her lips curling with a calm contentment, allowed that inappropriate language to pass without correction, although Ben immediately took it up and sang, “She’s an old brick, old brick, old brick!” to a cantering measure, which he beat out with his fist on Mary’s arm.

But Mrs. Garth’s eyes were now drawn towards her husband, who was already deep in the letter he was reading. His face had an expression of grave surprise, which alarmed her a little, but he did not like to be questioned while he was reading, and she remained anxiously watching till she saw him suddenly shaken by a little joyous laugh as he turned back to the beginning of the letter, and looking at her above his spectacles, said in a low tone, “What do you think, Susan?”

She went and stood behind him, putting her hand on his shoulder, while they read the letter together. It was from Sir James Chettam, offering to Mr. Garth the management of the family estates at Freshitt and elsewhere, and adding that Sir James had been requested by Mr. Brooke of Tipton to ascertain whether Mr. Garth would be disposed at the same time to resume the agency of the Tipton property. The baronet added in very obliging words that he himself was particularly desirous of seeing the Freshitt and Tipton estates under the same management, and he hoped to be able to show that the double agency might be held on terms agreeable to Mr. Garth, whom he would be glad to see at the hall at twelve o’clock on the following day.

“He writes handsomely, doesn’t he, Susan?” said Caleb, turning his eyes upward to his wife, who raised her hand from his shoulder to his ear, while she rested her chin on his head. “Brooke didn’t like to ask me himself, I can see,” he continued, laughing silently.

“Here is an honour to your father, children,” said Mrs. Garth, looking round at the five pair of eyes, all fixed on the parents. “He is asked to take a post again by those who dismissed him long ago. That shows that he did his work well, so that they feel the want of him.”

“Like Cincinnatus—hooray!” said Ben, riding on his chair with a pleasant confidence that discipline was relaxed.

“Will they come to fetch him, Mother?” said Letty, thinking of the mayor and corporation in their robes. Mrs. Garth patted Letty’s head and smiled, but seeing that her husband was gathering up his letters and likely soon to be out of reach in that sanctuary “business,” she pressed his shoulder and said emphatically, “Now, mind you ask fair pay, Caleb.”

“Oh yes,” said Caleb in a deep voice of assent, as if it would be unreasonable to suppose anything else of him. “It’ll come to between four and five hundred, the two together.” Then with a little start of remembrance he said, “Mary, write and give up that school. Stay and help your mother. I’m as pleased as Punch, now I’ve thought of that.”

No manner could have been less like that of Punch triumphant than Caleb’s, but his talents did not lie in finding phrases, though he was very particular about his letter-writing and regarded his wife as a treasury of correct language.

There was almost an uproar among the children now, and Mary held up the cambric embroidery towards her mother entreatingly, that it might be put out of reach while the boys dragged her into a dance. Mrs. Garth, in placid joy, began to put the cups and plates together, while Caleb, pushing his chair from the table as if he were going to move to the desk, still sat holding his letters in his hand and looking on the ground meditatively, stretching out the fingers of his left hand, according to a mute language of his own. At last he said, “It’s a thousand pities Christy didn’t take to business, Susan. I shall want help by and by. And Alfred must go off to the engineering—I’ve made up my mind to that.” He fell into meditation and finger-rhetoric again for a little while and then continued: “I shall make Brooke have new agreements with the tenants, and I shall draw up a rotation of crops. And I’ll lay a wager we can get fine bricks out of the clay at Bott’s corner. I must look into that; it would cheapen the repairs. It’s a fine bit of work, Susan! A man without a family would be glad to do it for nothing.”

“Mind you don’t, though,” said his wife, lifting up her finger.

“No, no; but it’s a fine thing to come to a man when he’s seen into the nature of business: to have the chance of getting a bit of the country into good fettle, as they say, and putting men into the right way with their farming, and getting a bit of good contriving and solid building done—that those who are living and those who come after will be the better for. I’d sooner have it than a fortune. I hold it the most honourable work that is.” Here Caleb laid down his letters, thrust his fingers between the buttons of his waistcoat, and sat upright, but presently proceeded with some awe in his voice and moving his head slowly aside, “It’s a great gift of God, Susan.”

“That it is, Caleb,” said his wife with answering fervour. “And it will be a blessing to your children to have had a father who did such work, a father whose good work remains though his name may be forgotten.” She could not say any more to him then about the pay.

In the evening, when Caleb, rather tired with his day’s work, was seated in silence with his pocket-book open on his knee, while Mrs. Garth and Mary were at their sewing and Letty in a corner was whispering a dialogue with her doll, Mr. Farebrother came up the orchard walk, dividing the bright August lights and shadows with the tufted grass and the apple-tree boughs. We know that he was fond of his parishioners the Garths and had thought Mary worth mentioning to Lydgate. He used to the full the clergyman’s privilege of disregarding the Middlemarch discrimination of ranks, and always told his mother that Mrs. Garth was more of a lady than any matron in the town. Still, you see, he spent his evenings at the Vincys’, where the matron, though less of a lady, presided over a well-lit drawing-room and whist. In those days human intercourse was not determined solely by respect. But the vicar did heartily respect the Garths, and a visit from him was no surprise to that family. Nevertheless he accounted for it even while he was shaking hands, by saying, “I come as an envoy, Mrs. Garth; I have something to say to you and Garth on behalf of Fred Vincy. The fact is, poor fellow,” he continued, as he seated himself and looked round with his bright glance at the three who were listening to him, “he has taken me into his confidence.”

Mary’s heart beat rather quickly; she wondered how far Fred’s confidence had gone.

“We haven’t seen the lad for months,” said Caleb. “I couldn’t think what was become of him.”

“He has been away on a visit,” said the vicar, “because home was a little too hot for him, and Lydgate told his mother that the poor fellow must not begin to study yet. But yesterday he came and poured himself out to me. I am very glad he

did because I have seen him grow up from a youngster of fourteen, and I am so much at home in the house that the children are like nephews and nieces to me. But it is a difficult case to advise upon. However, he has asked me to come and tell you that he is going away and that he is so miserable about his debt to you, and his inability to pay, that he can't bear to come himself even to bid you good-bye."

"Tell him it doesn't signify a farthing," said Caleb, waving his hand. "We've had the pinch and have got over it. And now I'm going to be as rich as a Jew."

"Which means," said Mrs. Garth, smiling at the vicar, "that we are going to have enough to bring up the boys well and to keep Mary at home."

"What is the treasure-trove?" said Mr. Farebrother.

"I'm going to be agent for two estates, Freshitt and Tipton, and perhaps for a pretty little bit of land in Lowick besides; it's all the same family connexion, and employment spreads like water if it's once set going. It makes me very happy, Mr. Farebrother"—here Caleb threw back his head a little and spread his arms on the elbows of his chair—"that I've got an opportunity again with the letting of the land and carrying out a notion or two with improvements. It's a most uncommonly cramping thing, as I've often told Susan, to sit on horseback and look over the hedges at the wrong thing and not be able to put your hand to it to make it right. What people do who go into politics I can't think; it drives me almost mad to see mismanagement over only a few hundred acres."

It was seldom that Caleb volunteered so long a speech, but his happiness had the effect of mountain air; his eyes were bright, and the words came without effort.

"I congratulate you heartily, Garth," said the vicar. "This is the best sort of news I could have had to carry to Fred Vincy, for he dwelt a good deal on the injury he had done you in causing you to part with money—robbing you of it, he said—which you wanted for other purposes. I wish Fred were not such an idle dog; he has some very good points, and his father is a little hard upon him."

"Where is he going?" said Mrs. Garth rather coldly.

"He means to try again for his degree, and he is going up to study before term. I have advised him to do that. I don't urge him to enter the Church—on the contrary. But if he will go and work so as to pass, that will be some guarantee that he has energy and a will; and he is quite at sea; he doesn't know what else to do. So far he will please his father, and I have promised in the meantime to try and reconcile Vincy to his son's adopting some other line of life. Fred says frankly he is not fit for a clergyman, and I would do anything I could to hinder a man from the fatal step of choosing the wrong profession. He quoted to me what you said, Miss Garth—do you remember it?" (Mr. Farebrother used to say "Mary" instead of "Miss Garth," but it was part of his delicacy to treat her with the more deference because, according to Mrs. Vincy's phrase, she worked for her bread.)

Mary felt uncomfortable, but determined to take the matter lightly, answered at once, "I have said so many impertinent things to Fred—we are such old playfellows."

"You said, according to him, that he would be one of those ridiculous clergymen who help to make the whole clergy ridiculous. Really, that was so cutting that I felt a little cut myself."

Caleb laughed. "She gets her tongue from you, Susan," he said with some enjoyment.

"Not its flippancy, Father," said Mary quickly, fearing that her mother would be displeased. "It is rather too bad of Fred to repeat my flippant speeches to Mr. Farebrother."

"It was certainly a hasty speech, my dear," said Mrs. Garth, with whom speaking evil of dignities was a high misdemeanour. "We should not value our vicar the less because there was a ridiculous curate in the next parish."

"There's something in what she says, though," said Caleb, not disposed to have Mary's sharpness undervalued. "A bad workman of any sort makes his fellows mistrusted. Things hang together," he added, looking on the floor and moving his feet uneasily with a sense that words were scantier than thoughts.

"Clearly," said the vicar, amused. "By being contemptible we set men's minds to the tune of contempt. I certainly agree with Miss Garth's view of the matter, whether I am condemned by it or not. But as to Fred Vincy, it is only fair he should be excused a little: old Featherstone's delusive behaviour did help to spoil him. There was something quite diabolical in not leaving him a farthing after all. But Fred has the good taste not to dwell on that. And what he cares most about is having offended you, Mrs. Garth; he supposes you will never think well of him again."

"I have been disappointed in Fred," said Mrs. Garth with decision. "But I shall be ready to think well of him again when he gives me good reason to do so."

At this point Mary went out of the room, taking Letty with her.

"Oh, we must forgive young people when they're sorry," said Caleb, watching Mary close the door. "And as you say, Mr. Farebrother, there was the very devil in that old man. Now Mary's gone out, I must tell you a thing—it's only known to Susan and me, and you'll not tell it again. The old scoundrel wanted Mary to burn one of the wills the very night he died, when she was sitting up with him by herself, and he offered her a sum of money that he had in the box by him if she would do it. But Mary, you understand, could do no such thing—would not be handling his iron chest, and so on. Now, you see, the will he wanted burnt was this last, so that if Mary had done what he wanted, Fred Vincy would have had ten thousand pounds. The old man did turn to him at the last. That touches poor Mary close; she couldn't help it—she was in the right to do what she did, but she feels, as she says, much as if she had knocked down somebody's property and broken it against her will, when she was rightfully defending herself. I feel with her, somehow, and if I could make any amends to the poor lad, instead of bearing him a grudge for the harm he did us, I should be glad to do it. Now, what is your opinion, sir? Susan doesn't agree with me. She says—tell what you say, Susan."

"Mary could not have acted otherwise even if she had known what would be the effect on Fred," said Mrs. Garth, pausing from her work and looking at Mr. Farebrother. "And she was quite ignorant of it. It seems to me, a loss which falls on another because we have done right is not to lie upon our conscience."

The vicar did not answer immediately, and Caleb said, "It's the feeling. The child feels in that way, and I feel with her. You don't mean your horse to tread on a dog when you're backing out of the way, but it goes through you when it's done."

“I am sure Mrs. Garth would agree with you there,” said Mr. Farebrother, who for some reason seemed more inclined to ruminate than to speak. “One could hardly say that the feeling you mention about Fred is wrong—or rather, mistaken—though no man ought to make a claim on such feeling.”

“Well, well,” said Caleb; “it’s a secret. You will not tell Fred.”

“Certainly not. But I shall carry the other good news—that you can afford the loss he caused you.”

Mr. Farebrother left the house soon after, and seeing Mary in the orchard with Letty, went to say good-bye to her. They made a pretty picture in the western light, which brought out the brightness of the apples on the old scant-leaved boughs—Mary in her lavender gingham and black ribbons holding a basket, while Letty in her well-worn nankin picked up the fallen apples. If you want to know more particularly how Mary looked, ten to one you will see a face like hers in the crowded street tomorrow if you are there on the watch; she will not be among those daughters of Zion who are haughty and walk with stretched-out necks and wanton eyes, mincing as they go; let all those pass and fix your eyes on some small plump, brownish person, of firm but quiet carriage who looks about her but does not suppose that anybody is looking at her. If she has a broad face and square brow, well-marked eyebrows and curly dark hair, a certain expression of amusement in her glance which her mouth keeps the secret of, and for the rest features entirely insignificant—take that ordinary but not disagreeable person for a portrait of Mary Garth. If you made her smile, she would show you perfect little teeth; if you made her angry, she would not raise her voice, but would probably say one of the bitterest things you have ever tasted the flavour of; if you did her a kindness, she would never forget it. Mary admired the keen-faced, handsome little vicar in his well-brushed threadbare clothes more than any man she had had the opportunity of knowing. She had never heard him say a foolish thing, though she knew that he did unwise ones; and perhaps foolish sayings were more objectionable to her than any of Mr. Farebrother’s unwise doings. At least, it was remarkable that the actual imperfections of the vicar’s clerical character never seemed to call forth the same scorn and dislike which she showed beforehand for the predicted imperfections of the clerical character sustained by Fred Vincy. These irregularities of judgement, I imagine, are found even in riper minds than Mary Garth’s; our impartiality is kept for abstract merit and demerit, which none of us ever saw. Will anyone guess towards which of those widely different men Mary had the peculiar woman’s tenderness—the one she was most inclined to be severe on, or the contrary?

“Have you any message for your old playfellow, Miss Garth?” said the vicar as he took a fragrant apple from the basket which she held towards him and put it in his pocket. “Something to soften down that harsh judgement? I am going straight to see him.”

“No,” said Mary, shaking her head and smiling. “If I were to say that he would not be ridiculous as a clergyman, I must say that he would be something worse than ridiculous. But I am very glad to hear that he is going away to work.”

“On the other hand, I am very glad to hear that *you* are not going away to work. My mother, I am sure, will be all the happier if you will come to see her at the vicarage; you know she is fond of having young people to talk to, and she has a great deal to tell about old times. You will really be doing a kindness.”

“I should like it very much, if I may,” said Mary. “Everything seems too happy for me all at once. I thought it would always be part of my life to long for home, and losing that grievance makes me feel rather empty; I suppose it served instead of sense to fill up my mind?”

“May I go with you, Mary?” whispered Letty—a most inconvenient child, who listened to everything. But she was made exultant by having her chin pinched and her cheek kissed by Mr. Farebrother—an incident which she narrated to her mother and father.

As the vicar walked to Lowick, anyone watching him closely might have seen him twice shrug his shoulders. I think that the rare Englishmen who have this gesture are never of the heavy type—for fear of any lumbering instance to the contrary, I will say hardly ever; they have usually a fine temperament and much tolerance towards the smaller errors of men (themselves inclusive). The vicar was holding an inward dialogue in which he told himself that there was probably something more between Fred and Mary Garth than the regard of old playfellows, and replied with a question whether that bit of womanhood were not a great deal too choice for that crude young gentleman. The rejoinder to this was the first shrug. Then he laughed at himself for being likely to have felt jealous, as if he had been a man able to marry, which, added he, it is as clear as any balance-sheet that I am not. Whereupon followed the second shrug.

What could two men, so different from each other, see in this “brown patch,” as Mary called herself? It was certainly not her plainness that attracted them (and let all plain young ladies be warned against the dangerous encouragement given them by society to confide in their want of beauty). A human being in this aged nation of ours is a very wonderful whole, the slow creation of long interchanging influences; and charm is a result of two such wholes, the one loving and the one loved.

When Mr. and Mrs. Garth were sitting alone, Caleb said, “Susan, guess what I’m thinking of.”

“The rotation of crops,” said Mrs. Garth, smiling at him above her knitting, “or else the back-doors of the Tipton cottages.”

“No,” said Caleb gravely; “I am thinking that I could do a great turn for Fred Vincy. Christy’s gone, Alfred will be gone soon, and it will be five years before Jim is ready to take to business. I shall want help, and Fred might come in and learn the nature of things and act under me, and it might be the making of him into a useful man if he gives up being a parson. What do you think?”

“I think there is hardly anything honest that his family would object to more,” said Mrs. Garth decidedly.

“What care I about their objecting?” said Caleb with a sturdiness which he was apt to show when he had an opinion. “The lad is of age and must get his bread. He has sense enough and quickness enough; he likes being on the land, and it’s my belief that he could learn business well if he gave his mind to it.”

“But would he? His father and mother wanted him to be a fine gentleman, and I think he has the same sort of feeling himself. They all think us beneath them. And if the proposal came from you, I am sure Mrs. Vincy would say that we wanted Fred for Mary.”

“Life is a poor tale if it is to be settled by nonsense of that sort,” said Caleb with disgust.

“Yes, but there is a certain pride which is proper, Caleb.”

“I call it improper pride to let fools’ notions hinder you from doing a good action. There’s no sort of work,” said Caleb with fervour, putting out his hand and moving it up and down to mark his emphasis, “that could ever be done well if you minded what fools say. You must have it inside you that your plan is right, and that plan you must follow.”

“I will not oppose any plan you have set your mind on, Caleb,” said Mrs. Garth, who was a firm woman but knew there were some points on which her mild husband was yet firmer. “Still, it seems to be fixed that Fred is to go back to college; will it not be better to wait and see what he will choose to do after that? It is not easy to keep people against their will. And you are not yet quite sure enough of your own position, or what you will want.”

“Well, it may be better to wait a bit. But as to my getting plenty of work for two, I’m pretty sure of that. I’ve always had my hands full with scattered things, and there’s always something fresh turning up. Why, only yesterday—bless me, I don’t think I told you!—it was rather odd that two men should have been at me on different sides to do the same bit of valuing. And who do you think they were?” said Caleb, taking a pinch of snuff and holding it up between his fingers as if it were a part of his exposition. He was fond of a pinch when it occurred to him, but he usually forgot that this indulgence was at his command.

His wife held down her knitting and looked attentive.

“Why, that Rigg, or Rigg Featherstone, was one. But Bulstrode was before him, so I’m going to do it for Bulstrode. Whether it’s mortgage or purchase they’re going for, I can’t tell yet.”

“Can that man be going to sell the land just left him—which he has taken the name for?” said Mrs. Garth.

“Deuce knows,” said Caleb, who never referred the knowledge of discreditable doings to any higher power than the deuce. “But Bulstrode has long been wanting to get a handsome bit of land under his fingers—that I know. And it’s a difficult matter to get in this part of the country.”

Caleb scattered his snuff carefully instead of taking it, and then added, “The ins and outs of things are curious. Here is the land they’ve been all along expecting for Fred, which it seems the old man never meant to leave him a foot of, but left it to this side-slip of a son that he kept in the dark, and thought of his sticking there and vexing everybody as well as he could have vexed ’em himself if he could have kept alive. I say, it would be curious if it got into Bulstrode’s hands after all. The old man hated him and never would bank with him.”

“What reason could the miserable creature have for hating a man whom he had nothing to do with?” said Mrs. Garth.

“Pooh! Where’s the use of asking for such fellows’ reasons? The soul of man,” said Caleb with the deep tone and grave shake of the head which always came when he used this phrase—“the soul of man, when it gets fairly rotten, will bear you all sorts of poisonous toad-stools, and no eye can see whence came the seed thereof.”

It was one of Caleb’s quaintnesses that in his difficulty of finding speech for his thought, he caught, as it were, snatches of diction which he associated with various points of view or states of mind; and whenever he had a feeling of awe, he was haunted by a sense of Biblical phraseology, though he could hardly have given a strict quotation.

CHAPTER 41

By swaggering could I never thrive,
For the rain it raineth every day.

—*Twelfth Night*

The transactions referred to by Caleb Garth as having gone forward between Mr. Bulstrode and Mr. Joshua Rigg Featherstone concerning the land attached to Stone Court had occasioned the interchange of a letter or two between these personages.

Who shall tell what may be the effect of writing? If it happens to have been cut in stone, though it lie face downmost for ages on a forsaken beach or "rest quietly under the drums and tramplings of many conquests," it may end by letting us into the secret of usurpations and other scandals gossiped about long empires ago, this world being apparently a huge whispering-gallery. Such conditions are often minutely represented in our petty lifetimes. As the stone which has been kicked by generations of clowns may come by curious little links of effect under the eyes of a scholar, through whose labours it may at last fix the date of invasions and unlock religions, so a bit of ink and paper which has long been an innocent wrapping or stop-gap may at last be laid open under the one pair of eyes which have knowledge enough to turn it into the opening of a catastrophe. To Uriel watching the progress of planetary history from the sun, the one result would be just as much of a coincidence as the other.

Having made this rather lofty comparison I am less uneasy in calling attention to the existence of low people by whose interference, however little we may like it, the course of the world is very much determined. It would be well, certainly, if we could help to reduce their number, and something might perhaps be done by not lightly giving occasion to their existence. Socially speaking, Joshua Rigg would have been generally pronounced a superfluity. But those who like Peter Featherstone never had a copy of themselves demanded are the very last to wait for such a request either in prose or verse. The copy in this case bore more of outside resemblance to the mother, in whose sex frog-features, accompanied with fresh-coloured cheeks and a well-rounded figure, are compatible with much charm for a certain order of admirers. The result is sometimes a frog-faced male, desirable, surely, to no order of intelligent beings. Especially when he is suddenly brought into evidence to frustrate other people's expectations—the very lowest aspect in which a social superfluity can present himself.

But Mr. Rigg Featherstone's low characteristics were all of the sober, water-drinking kind. From the earliest to the latest hour of the day he was always as sleek, neat, and cool as the frog he resembled, and old Peter had secretly chuckled over an offshoot almost more calculating and far more imperturbable than himself. I will add that his fingernails were scrupulously attended to and that he meant to marry a well-educated young lady (as yet unspecified) whose person was good and whose connexions, in a solid, middle-class way, were undeniable. Thus his nails and modesty were comparable to those of most gentlemen, though his ambition had been educated only by the opportunities of a clerk and accountant in the smaller commercial houses of a seaport. He thought the rural Featherstones very simple, absurd people, and they in their turn regarded his "bringing up" in a seaport town as an exaggeration of the monstrosity that their brother Peter, and still more Peter's property, should have had such belongings.

The garden and gravel approach, as seen from the two windows of the wainscoted parlour at Stone Court, were never in better trim than now, when Mr. Rigg Featherstone stood, with his hands behind him, looking out on these grounds as their master. But it seemed doubtful whether he looked out for the sake of contemplation or of turning his back to a person who stood in the middle of the room, with his legs considerably apart and his hands in his trouser pockets, a person in all respects a contrast to the sleek and cool Rigg. He was a man obviously on the way towards sixty, very florid and hairy, with much grey in his bushy whiskers and thick, curly hair, a stoutish body which showed to disadvantage the somewhat worn joinings of his clothes, and the air of a swaggerer, who would aim at being noticeable even at a show of fireworks, regarding his own remarks on any other person's performance as likely to be more interesting than the performance itself.

His name was John Raffles, and he sometimes wrote jocosely W.A.G. after his signature, observing when he did so that he was once taught by Leonard Lamb of Finsbury who wrote B.A. after his name, and that he, Raffles, originated the witticism of calling that celebrated principal Ba-Lamb. Such were the appearance and mental flavour of Mr. Raffles, both of which seemed to have a stale odour of travellers' rooms in the commercial hotels of that period.

"Come, now, Josh," he was saying in a full, rumbling tone, "look at it in this light: here is your poor mother going into the vale of years, and you could afford something handsome now to make her comfortable."

"Not while you live. Nothing would make her comfortable while you live," returned Rigg in his cool, high voice. "What I give her, you'll take."

"You bear me a grudge, Josh, that I know. But come, now—as between man and man—without humbug—a little capital might enable me to make a first-rate thing of the shop. The tobacco trade is growing. I should cut my own nose off in not doing the best I could at it. I should stick to it like a flea to a fleece for my own sake. I should always be on the spot. And nothing would make your poor mother so happy. I've pretty well done with my wild oats—turned fifty-five. I want to settle down in my chimney-corner. And if I once buckled to the tobacco trade, I could bring an amount of brains and experience

to bear on it that would not be found elsewhere in a hurry. I don't want to be bothering you one time after another, but to get things once for all into the right channel. Consider that, Josh—as between man and man—and with your poor mother to be made easy for her life. I was always fond of the old woman, *by* Jove!"

"Have you done?" said Mr. Rigg quietly, without looking away from the window.

"Yes, *I*'ve done," said Raffles, taking hold of his hat, which stood before him on the table, and giving it a sort of oratorical push.

"Then just listen to me. The more you say anything, the less I shall believe it. The more you want me to do a thing, the more reason I shall have for never doing it. Do you think I mean to forget your kicking me when I was a lad and eating all the best victual away from me and my mother? Do you think I forget your always coming home to sell and pocket everything and going off again leaving us in the lurch? I should be glad to see you whipped at the cart-tail. My mother was a fool to you; she'd no right to give me a father-in-law, and she's been punished for it. She shall have her weekly allowance paid and no more; and that shall be stopped if you dare to come on to these premises again or to come into this country after me again. The next time you show yourself inside the gates here, you shall be driven off with the dogs and the waggoner's whip."

As Rigg pronounced the last words he turned round and looked at Raffles with his prominent, frozen eyes. The contrast was as striking as it could have been eighteen years before, when Rigg was a most unengaging, kickable boy, and Raffles was the rather thick-set Adonis of bar-rooms and back-parlours. But the advantage now was on the side of Rigg, and auditors of this conversation might probably have expected that Raffles would retire with the air of a defeated dog. Not at all. He made a grimace which was habitual with him whenever he was "out" in a game, then subsided into a laugh, and drew a brandy flask from his pocket.

"Come, Josh," he said in a cajoling tone, "give us a spoonful of brandy and a sovereign to pay the way back, and I'll go. Honour bright! I'll go like a bullet, *by* Jove!"

"Mind," said Rigg, drawing out a bunch of keys, "if I ever see you again, I shan't speak to you. I don't own you any more than if I saw a crow; and if you want to own me you'll get nothing by it but a character for being what you are—a spiteful, brassy, bullying rogue."

"That's a pity, now, Josh," said Raffles, affecting to scratch his head and wrinkle his brows upward as if he were nonplussed. "I'm very fond of you; *by* Jove, I am! There's nothing I like better than plaguing you—you're so like your mother; and I must do without it. But the brandy and the sovereign's a bargain."

He jerked forward the flask and Rigg went to a fine old oaken bureau with his keys. But Raffles had reminded himself by his movement with the flask that it had become dangerously loose from its leather covering, and catching sight of a folded paper which had fallen within the fender, he took it up and shoved it under the leather so as to make the glass firm.

By that time Rigg came forward with a brandy bottle, filled the flask, and handed Raffles a sovereign, neither looking at him nor speaking to him. After locking up the bureau again, he walked to the window and gazed out as impassibly as he had done at the beginning of the interview, while Raffles took a small allowance from the flask, screwed it up, and deposited it in his side pocket with provoking slowness, making a grimace at his stepson's back.

"Farewell, Josh—and if forever!" said Raffles, turning back his head as he opened the door.

Rigg saw him leave the grounds and enter the lane. The grey day had turned to a light, drizzling rain, which freshened the hedgerows and the grassy borders of the byroads and hastened the labourers who were loading the last shocks of corn. Raffles, walking with the uneasy gait of a town loiterer obliged to do a bit of country journeying on foot, looked as incongruous amid this moist rural quiet and industry as if he had been a baboon escaped from a menagerie. But there were none to stare at him except the long-weaned calves, and none to show dislike of his appearance except the little water-rats which rustled away at his approach.

He was fortunate enough when he got on to the highroad to be overtaken by the stagecoach, which carried him to Brassing; and there he took the new-made railway, observing to his fellow-passengers that he considered it pretty well seasoned now it had done for Huskisson. Mr. Raffles on most occasions kept up the sense of having been educated at an academy and being able, if he chose, to pass well everywhere; indeed, there was not one of his fellow-men whom he did not feel himself in a position to ridicule and torment, confident of the entertainment which he thus gave to all the rest of the company.

He played this part now with as much spirit as if his journey had been entirely successful, resorting at frequent intervals to his flask. The paper with which he had wedged it was a letter signed "Nicholas Bulstrode," but Raffles was not likely to disturb it from its present useful position.

CHAPTER 42

How much, methinks, I could despise this man, Were I not bound in charity against it!
—SHAKESPEARE: *HENRY VIII*

One of the professional calls made by Lydgate soon after his return from his wedding-journey was to Lowick Manor, in consequence of a letter which had requested him to fix a time for his visit.

Mr. Casaubon had never put any question concerning the nature of his illness to Lydgate, nor had he even to Dorothea betrayed any anxiety as to how far it might be likely to cut short his labours or his life. On this point, as on all others, he shrank from pity; and if the suspicion of being pitied for anything in his lot surmised or known in spite of himself was embittering, the idea of calling forth a show of compassion by frankly admitting an alarm or a sorrow was necessarily intolerable to him. Every proud mind knows something of this experience, and perhaps it is only to be overcome by a sense of fellowship deep enough to make all efforts at isolation seem mean and petty instead of exalting.

But Mr. Casaubon was now brooding over something through which the question of his health and life haunted his silence with a more harassing importunity even than through the autumnal unripeness of his authorship. It is true that this last might be called his central ambition, but there are some kinds of authorship in which by far the largest result is the uneasy susceptibility accumulated in the consciousness of the author—one knows of the river by a few streaks amid a long-gathered deposit of uncomfortable mud. That was the way with Mr. Casaubon's hard intellectual labours. Their most characteristic result was not the *Key to All Mythologies*, but a morbid consciousness that others did not give him the place which he had not demonstrably merited—a perpetual suspicious conjecture that the views entertained of him were not to his advantage—a melancholy absence of passion in his efforts at achievement, and a passionate resistance to the confession that he had achieved nothing.

Thus his intellectual ambition which seemed to others to have absorbed and dried him was really no security against wounds, least of all against those which came from Dorothea. And he had begun now to frame possibilities for the future which were somehow more embittering to him than anything his mind had dwelt on before.

Against certain facts he was helpless: against Will Ladislaw's existence, his defiant stay in the neighbourhood of Lowick, and his flippant state of mind with regard to the possessors of authentic, well-stamped erudition; against Dorothea's nature, always taking on some new shape of ardent activity, and even in submission and silence covering fervid reasons which it was an irritation to think of; against certain notions and likings which had taken possession of her mind in relation to subjects that he could not possibly discuss with her. There was no denying that Dorothea was as virtuous and lovely a young lady as he could have obtained for a wife, but a young lady turned out to be something more troublesome than he had conceived. She nursed him, she read to him, she anticipated his wants, and was solicitous about his feelings; but there had entered into the husband's mind the certainty that she judged him and that her wifely devotedness was like a penitential expiation of unbelieving thoughts—was accompanied with a power of comparison by which himself and his doings were seen too luminously as a part of things in general. His discontent passed vapour-like through all her gentle, loving manifestations and clung to that inappreciative world which she had only brought nearer to him.

Poor Mr. Casaubon! This suffering was the harder to bear because it seemed like a betrayal: the young creature who had worshipped him with perfect trust had quickly turned into the critical wife, and early instances of criticism and resentment had made an impression which no tenderness and submission afterwards could remove. To his suspicious interpretation Dorothea's silence now was a suppressed rebellion; a remark from her which he had not in any way anticipated was an assertion of conscious superiority; her gentle answers had an irritating cautiousness in them; and when she acquiesced it was a self-approved effort of forbearance. The tenacity with which he strove to hide this inward drama made it the more vivid for him, as we hear with the more keenness what we wish others not to hear.

Instead of wondering at this result of misery in Mr. Casaubon, I think it quite ordinary. Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world and leave only a margin by which we see the blot? I know no speck so troublesome as self. And who, if Mr. Casaubon had chosen to expound his discontents—his suspicions that he was not any longer adored without criticism—could have denied that they were founded on good reasons? On the contrary, there was a strong reason to be added, which he had not himself taken explicitly into account, namely, that he was not unmixedly adorable. He suspected this, however, as he suspected other things, without confessing it, and like the rest of us, felt how soothing it would have been to have a companion who would never find it out.

This sore susceptibility in relation to Dorothea was thoroughly prepared before Will Ladislaw had returned to Lowick, and what had occurred since then had brought Mr. Casaubon's power of suspicious construction into exasperated activity. To all the facts which he knew, he added imaginary facts both present and future, which became more real to him than those because they called up a stronger dislike, a more predominating bitterness. Suspicion and jealousy of Will Ladislaw's intentions, suspicion and jealousy of Dorothea's impressions, were constantly at their weaving work. It would be quite unjust to him to suppose that he could have entered into any coarse misinterpretation of Dorothea: his own habits of mind and conduct, quite as much as the open elevation of her nature, saved him from any such mistake. What he was jealous of was her opinion, the sway that might be given to her ardent mind in its judgements, and the future possibilities to which

these might lead her. As to Will, though until his last defiant letter he had nothing definite which he would choose formally to allege against him, he felt himself warranted in believing that he was capable of any design which could fascinate a rebellious temper and an undisciplined impulsiveness. He was quite sure that Dorothea was the cause of Will's return from Rome and his determination to settle in the neighbourhood, and he was penetrating enough to imagine that Dorothea had innocently encouraged this course. It was as clear as possible that she was ready to be attached to Will and to be pliant to his suggestions: they had never had a *tête-à-tête* without her bringing away from it some new troublesome impression, and the last interview that Mr. Casaubon was aware of (Dorothea, on returning from Freshitt Hall, had for the first time been silent about having seen Will) had led to a scene which roused an angrier feeling against them both than he had ever known before. Dorothea's outpouring of her notions about money in the darkness of the night had done nothing but bring a mixture of more odious foreboding into her husband's mind.

And there was the shock lately given to his health always sadly present with him. He was certainly much revived; he had recovered all his usual power of work: the illness might have been mere fatigue, and there might still be twenty years of achievement before him, which would justify the thirty years of preparation. That prospect was made the sweeter by a flavour of vengeance against the hasty sneers of Carp & Company; for even when Mr. Casaubon was carrying his taper among the tombs of the past, those modern figures came athwart the dim light and interrupted his diligent exploration. To convince Carp of his mistake so that he would have to eat his own words with a good deal of indigestion would be an agreeable accident of triumphant authorship, which the prospect of living to future ages on earth and to all eternity in heaven could not exclude from contemplation. Since, thus, the prevision of his own unending bliss could not nullify the bitter savours of irritated jealousy and vindictiveness, it is the less surprising that the probability of a transient earthly bliss for other persons, when he himself should have entered into glory, had not a potently sweetening effect. If the truth should be that some undermining disease was at work within him, there might be large opportunity for some people to be the happier when he was gone; and if one of those people should be Will Ladislaw, Mr. Casaubon objected so strongly that it seemed as if the annoyance would make part of his disembodied existence.

This is a very bare and therefore a very incomplete way of putting the case. The human soul moves in many channels, and Mr. Casaubon, we know, had a sense of rectitude and an honourable pride in satisfying the requirements of honour, which compelled him to find other reasons for his conduct than those of jealousy and vindictiveness. The way in which Mr. Casaubon put the case was this:

"In marrying Dorothea Brooke I had to care for her well being in case of my death. But well being is not to be secured by ample, independent possession of property; on the contrary, occasions might arise in which such possession might expose her to the more danger. She is ready prey to any man who knows how to play adroitly either on her affectionate ardour or her quixotic enthusiasm; and a man stands by with that very intention in his mind—a man with no other principle than transient caprice, and who has a personal animosity towards me—I am sure of it—an animosity which is fed by the consciousness of his ingratitude and which he has constantly vented in ridicule, of which I am as well assured as if I had heard it. Even if I live I shall not be without uneasiness as to what he may attempt through indirect influence. This man has gained Dorothea's ear; he has fascinated her attention; he has evidently tried to impress her mind with the notion that he has claims beyond anything I have done for him. If I die—and he is waiting here on the watch for that—he will persuade her to marry him. That would be calamity for her and success for him. *She* would not think it calamity: he would make her believe anything; she has a tendency to immoderate attachment which she inwardly reproaches me for not responding to, and already her mind is occupied with his fortunes. He thinks of an easy conquest and of entering into my nest. That I will hinder! Such a marriage would be fatal to Dorothea. Has he ever persisted in anything except from contradiction? In knowledge he has always tried to be showy at small cost. In religion he could be, as long as it suited him, the facile echo of Dorothea's vagaries. When was sciolism ever dissociated from laxity? I utterly distrust his morals, and it is my duty to hinder to the utmost the fulfilment of his designs."

The arrangements made by Mr. Casaubon on his marriage left strong measures open to him, but in ruminating on them his mind inevitably dwelt so much on the probabilities of his own life that the longing to get the nearest possible calculation had at last overcome his proud reticence and had determined him to ask Lydgate's opinion as to the nature of his illness.

He had mentioned to Dorothea that Lydgate was coming by appointment at half past three, and in answer to her anxious question, whether he had felt ill, replied, "No, I merely wish to have his opinion concerning some habitual symptoms. You need not see him, my dear. I shall give orders that he may be sent to me in the yew-tree walk, where I shall be taking my usual exercise."

When Lydgate entered the yew-tree walk he saw Mr. Casaubon slowly receding with his hands behind him according to his habit and his head bent forward. It was a lovely afternoon; the leaves from the lofty limes were falling silently across the sombre evergreens, while the lights and shadows slept side by side; there was no sound but the cawing of the rooks, which to the accustomed ear is a lullaby, or that last solemn lullaby, a dirge. Lydgate, conscious of an energetic frame in its prime, felt some compassion when the figure which he was likely soon to overtake turned round and in advancing towards him showed more markedly than ever the signs of premature age—the student's bent shoulders, the emaciated limbs, and the melancholy lines of the mouth. "Poor fellow," he thought, "some men with his years are like lions; one can tell nothing of their age except that they are full grown."

"Mr. Lydgate," said Mr. Casaubon with his invariably polite air, "I am exceedingly obliged to you for your punctuality. We will, if you please, carry on our conversation in walking to and fro."

"I hope your wish to see me is not due to the return of unpleasant symptoms," said Lydgate, filling up a pause.

"Not immediately—no. In order to account for that wish I must mention—what it were otherwise needless to refer to—that my life, on all collateral accounts insignificant, derives a possible importance from the incompleteness of labours which have extended through all its best years. In short, I have long had on hand a work which I would fain leave behind me in such a state, at least, that it might be committed to the press by—others. Were I assured that this is the utmost I can reasonably expect, that assurance would be a useful circumscription of my attempts and a guide in both the positive and

negative determination of my course."

Here Mr. Casaubon paused, removed one hand from his back and thrust it between the buttons of his single-breasted coat. To a mind largely instructed in the human destiny, hardly anything could be more interesting than the inward conflict implied in his formal measured address, delivered with the usual sing-song and motion of the head. Nay, are there many situations more sublimely tragic than the struggle of the soul with the demand to renounce a work which has been all the significance of its life—a significance which is to vanish as the waters which come and go where no man has need of them? But there was nothing to strike others as sublime about Mr. Casaubon, and Lydgate, who had some contempt at hand for futile scholarship, felt a little amusement mingling with his pity. He was at present too ill-acquainted with disaster to enter into the pathos of a lot where everything is below the level of tragedy except the passionate egoism of the sufferer.

"You refer to the possible hindrances from want of health?" he said, wishing to help forward Mr. Casaubon's purpose, which seemed to be clogged by some hesitation.

"I do. You have not implied to me that the symptoms which—I am bound to testify—you watched with scrupulous care were those of a fatal disease. But were it so, Mr. Lydgate, I should desire to know the truth without reservation, and I appeal to you for an exact statement of your conclusions: I request it as a friendly service. If you can tell me that my life is not threatened by anything else than ordinary casualties, I shall rejoice, on grounds which I have already indicated. If not, knowledge of the truth is even more important to me."

"Then I can no longer hesitate as to my course," said Lydgate; "but the first thing I must impress on you is that my conclusions are doubly uncertain—uncertain not only because of my fallibility, but because diseases of the heart are eminently difficult to found predictions on. In any case, one can hardly increase appreciably the tremendous uncertainty of life."

Mr. Casaubon winced perceptibly, but bowed.

"I believe that you are suffering from what is called fatty degeneration of the heart, a disease which was first divined and explored by Laennec, the man who gave us the stethoscope, not so very many years ago. A good deal of experience—a more lengthened observation—is wanting on the subject. But after what you have said, it is my duty to tell you that death from this disease is often sudden. At the same time, no such result can be predicted. Your condition may be consistent with a tolerably comfortable life for another fifteen years, or even more. I could add no information to this beyond anatomical or medical details, which would leave expectation at precisely the same point."

Lydgate's instinct was fine enough to tell him that plain speech, quite free from ostentatious caution, would be felt by Mr. Casaubon as a tribute of respect.

"I thank you, Mr. Lydgate," said Mr. Casaubon after a moment's pause. "One thing more I have still to ask: did you communicate what you have now told me to Mrs. Casaubon?"

"Partly—I mean, as to the possible issues." Lydgate was going to explain why he had told Dorothea, but Mr. Casaubon, with an unmistakable desire to end the conversation, waved his hand slightly and said again, "I thank you," proceeding to remark on the rare beauty of the day.

Lydgate, certain that his patient wished to be alone, soon left him; and the black figure with hands behind and head bent forward continued to pace the walk where the dark yew-trees gave him a mute companionship in melancholy, and the little shadows of bird or leaf that fleeted across the isles of sunlight stole along in silence as in the presence of a sorrow. Here was a man who now for the first time found himself looking into the eyes of death—who was passing through one of those rare moments of experience when we feel the truth of a commonplace, which is as different from what we call knowing it as the vision of waters upon the earth is different from the delirious vision of the water which cannot be had to cool the burning tongue. When the commonplace "We must all die" transforms itself suddenly into the acute consciousness "I must die—and soon," then death grapples us, and his fingers are cruel; afterwards, he may come to fold us in his arms as our mother did, and our last moment of dim earthly discerning may be like the first. To Mr. Casaubon now, it was as if he suddenly found himself on the dark river-brink and heard the plash of the oncoming oar, not discerning the forms, but expecting the summons. In such an hour the mind does not change its lifelong bias, but carries it onward in imagination to the other side of death, gazing backward, perhaps with the divine calm of beneficence, perhaps with the petty anxieties of self-assertion. What was Mr. Casaubon's bias his acts will give us a clue to. He held himself to be, with some private scholarly reservations, a believing Christian as to estimates of the present and hopes of the future. But what we strive to gratify, though we may call it a distant hope, is an immediate desire: the future estate for which men drudge up city alleys exists already in their imagination and love. And Mr. Casaubon's immediate desire was not for divine communion and light divested of earthly conditions; his passionate longings, poor man, clung low and mistlike in very shady places.

Dorothea had been aware when Lydgate had ridden away, and she had stepped into the garden with the impulse to go at once to her husband. But she hesitated, fearing to offend him by obtruding herself, for her ardour, continually repulsed, served with her intense memory to heighten her dread, as thwarted energy subsides into a shudder; and she wandered slowly round the nearer clumps of trees until she saw him advancing. Then she went towards him, and might have represented a heaven-sent angel coming with a promise that the short hours remaining should yet be filled with that faithful love which clings the closer to a comprehended grief. His glance in reply to hers was so chill that she felt her timidity increased; yet she turned and passed her hand through his arm.

Mr. Casaubon kept his hands behind him and allowed her pliant arm to cling with difficulty against his rigid arm.

There was something horrible to Dorothea in the sensation which this unresponsive hardness inflicted on her. This is a strong word, but not too strong: it is in these acts called trivialities that the seeds of joy are forever wasted until men and women look round with haggard faces at the devastation their own waste has made and say the earth bears no harvest of sweetness—calling their denial knowledge. You may ask why, in the name of manliness, Mr. Casaubon should have behaved in that way. Consider that his was a mind which shrank from pity: have you ever watched in such a mind the effect of a suspicion that what is pressing it as a grief may be really a source of contentment, either actual or future, to the being who already offends by pitying? Besides, he knew little of Dorothea's sensations and had not reflected that on such an occasion as the present they were comparable in strength to his own sensibilities about Carp's criticisms.

Dorothea did not withdraw her arm, but she could not venture to speak. Mr. Casaubon did not say, “I wish to be alone,” but he directed his steps in silence towards the house, and as they entered by the glass door on this eastern side, Dorothea withdrew her arm and lingered on the matting that she might leave her husband quite free. He entered the library and shut himself in, alone with his sorrow.

She went up to her boudoir. The open bow-window let in the serene glory of the afternoon lying in the avenue, where the lime-trees cast long shadows. But Dorothea knew nothing of the scene. She threw herself on a chair, not heeding that she was in the dazzling sun-rays; if there were discomfort in that, how could she tell that it was not part of her inward misery?

She was in the reaction of a rebellious anger stronger than any she had felt since her marriage. Instead of tears there came words:

“What have I done—what am I—that he should treat me so? He never knows what is in my mind—he never cares. What is the use of anything I do? He wishes he had never married me.”

She began to hear herself and was checked into stillness. Like one who has lost his way and is weary, she sat and saw as in one glance all the paths of her young hope which she should never find again. And just as clearly in the miserable light she saw her own and her husband’s solitude—how they walked apart so that she was obliged to survey him. If he had drawn her towards him, she would never have surveyed him—never have said, “Is he worth living for?” but would have felt him simply a part of her own life. Now she said bitterly, “It is his fault, not mine.” In the jar of her whole being, pity was overthrown. Was it her fault that she had believed in him—had believed in his worthiness? And what, exactly, was he? She was able enough to estimate him—she who waited on his glances with trembling and shut her best soul in prison, paying it only hidden visits, that she might be petty enough to please him. In such a crisis as this, some women begin to hate.

The sun was low when Dorothea was thinking that she would not go down again, but would send a message to her husband saying that she was not well and preferred remaining upstairs. She had never deliberately allowed her resentment to govern her in this way before, but she believed now that she could not see him again without telling him the truth about her feeling, and she must wait till she could do it without interruption. He might wonder and be hurt at her message. It was good that he should wonder and be hurt. Her anger said, as anger is apt to say, that God was with her, that all heaven, though it were crowded with spirits watching them, must be on her side. She had determined to ring her bell when there came a rap at the door.

Mr. Casaubon had sent to say that he would have his dinner in the library. He wished to be quite alone this evening, being much occupied.

“I shall not dine, then, Tantripp.”

“Oh, Madam, let me bring you a little something?”

“No; I am not well. Get everything ready in my dressing-room, but pray do not disturb me again.”

Dorothea sat almost motionless in her meditative struggle, while the evening slowly deepened into night. But the struggle changed continually, as that of a man who begins with a movement towards striking and ends with conquering his desire to strike. The energy that would animate a crime is not more than is wanted to inspire a resolved submission when the noble habit of the soul reasserts itself. That thought with which Dorothea had gone out to meet her husband, her conviction that he had been asking about the possible arrest of all his work and that the answer must have wrung his heart, could not be long without rising beside the image of him like a shadowy monitor looking at her anger with sad remonstrance. It cost her a litany of pictured sorrows and of silent cries that she might be the mercy for those sorrows, but the resolved submission did come; and when the house was still, and she knew that it was near the time when Mr. Casaubon habitually went to rest, she opened her door gently and stood outside in the darkness waiting for his coming upstairs with a light in his hand. If he did not come soon she thought that she would go down and even risk incurring another pang. She would never again expect anything else. But she did hear the library door open, and slowly the light advanced up the staircase without noise from the footsteps on the carpet. When her husband stood opposite to her, she saw that his face was more haggard. He started slightly on seeing her, and she looked up at him beseechingly without speaking.

“Dorothea!” he said with a gentle surprise in his tone. “Were you waiting for me?”

“Yes, I did not like to disturb you.”

“Come, my dear, come. You are young and need not to extend your life by watching.”

When the kind, quiet melancholy of that speech fell on Dorothea’s ears, she felt something like the thankfulness that might well up in us if we had narrowly escaped hurting a lamed creature. She put her hand into her husband’s, and they went along the broad corridor together.

BOOK V

THE DEAD HAND

CHAPTER 43

This figure hath high price: 'twas wrought with love
Ages ago in finest ivory;
Nought modish in it, pure and noble lines
Of generous womanhood that fits all time.
That too is costly ware; majolica
Of deft design, to please a lordly eye:
The smile, you see, is perfect—wonderful
As mere Faience! a table ornament
To suit the richest mounting.

Dorothea seldom left home without her husband, but she did occasionally drive into Middlemarch alone on little errands of shopping or charity such as occur to every lady of any wealth when she lives within three miles of a town. Two days after that scene in the yew-tree walk, she determined to use such an opportunity in order if possible to see Lydgate and learn from him whether her husband had really felt any depressing change of symptoms which he was concealing from her and whether he had insisted on knowing the utmost about himself. She felt almost guilty in asking for knowledge about him from another, but the dread of being without it—the dread of that ignorance which would make her unjust or hard—overcame every scruple. That there had been some crisis in her husband's mind she was certain; he had the very next day begun a new method of arranging his notes and had associated her quite newly in carrying out his plan. Poor Dorothea needed to lay up stores of patience.

It was about four o'clock when she drove up to Lydgate's house in Lowick Gate, wishing, in her immediate doubt of finding him at home, that she had written beforehand. And he was not at home.

"Is Mrs. Lydgate at home?" said Dorothea, who had never, that she knew of, seen Rosamond, but now remembered the fact of the marriage. Yes, Mrs. Lydgate was at home.

"I will go in and speak to her if she will allow me. Will you ask her if she can see me, see Mrs. Casaubon, for a few minutes?"

When the servant had gone to deliver that message, Dorothea could hear sounds of music through an open window—a few notes from a man's voice and then a piano bursting into roulades. But the roulades broke off suddenly, and then the servant came back saying that Mrs. Lydgate would be happy to see Mrs. Casaubon.

When the drawing-room door opened and Dorothea entered, there was a sort of contrast not infrequent in country life when the habits of the different ranks were less blent than now. Let those who know tell us exactly what stuff it was that Dorothea wore in those days of mild autumn—that thin white woollen stuff soft to the touch and soft to the eye. It always seemed to have been lately washed and to smell of the sweet hedges, was always in the shape of a pelisse with sleeves hanging all out of the fashion. Yet if she had entered before a still audience as Imogene or Cato's daughter, the dress might have seemed right enough: the grace and dignity were in her limbs and neck; and about her simply parted hair and candid eyes the large round poke which was then in the fate of women seemed no more odd as a headdress than the gold trencher we call a halo. By the present audience of two persons, no dramatic heroine could have been expected with more interest than Mrs. Casaubon. To Rosamond she was one of those county divinities not mixing with Middlemarch mortality, whose slightest marks of manner or appearance were worthy of her study; moreover, Rosamond was not without satisfaction that Mrs. Casaubon should have an opportunity of studying *her*. What is the use of being exquisite if you are not seen by the best judges? And since Rosamond had received the highest compliments at Sir Godwin Lydgate's, she felt quite confident of the impression she must make on people of good birth. Dorothea put out her hand with her usual simple kindness and looked admiringly at Lydgate's lovely bride, aware that there was a gentleman standing at a distance, but seeing him merely as a coated figure at a wide angle. The gentleman was too much occupied with the presence of the one woman to reflect on the contrast between the two—a contrast that would certainly have been striking to a calm observer. They were both tall, and their eyes were on a level; but imagine Rosamond's infantine blondness and wondrous crown of hair-plaits, with her pale-blue dress of a fit and fashion so perfect that no dressmaker could look at it without emotion, a large embroidered collar which it was to be hoped all beholders would know the price of, her small hands duly set off with rings, and that controlled self-consciousness of manner which is the expensive substitute for simplicity.

"Thank you very much for allowing me to interrupt you," said Dorothea immediately. "I am anxious to see Mr. Lydgate if possible, before I go home, and I hoped that you might possibly tell me where I could find him, or even allow me to wait for him if you expect him soon."

"He is at the new hospital," said Rosamond; "I am not sure how soon he will come home. But I can send for him."

"Will you let me go and fetch him?" said Will Ladislaw, coming forward. He had already taken up his hat before Dorothea entered. She coloured with surprise but put out her hand with a smile of unmistakable pleasure, saying, "I did not know it was you; I had no thought of seeing you here."

"May I go to the hospital and tell Mr. Lydgate that you wish to see him?" said Will.

"It would be quicker to send the carriage for him," said Dorothea, "if you will be kind enough to give the message to the coachman."

Will was moving to the door when Dorothea, whose mind had flashed in an instant over many connected memories, turned quickly and said, “I will go myself, thank you. I wish to lose no time before getting home again. I will drive to the hospital and see Mr. Lydgate there. Pray excuse me, Mrs. Lydgate. I am very much obliged to you.”

Her mind was evidently arrested by some sudden thought, and she left the room hardly conscious of what was immediately around her, hardly conscious that Will opened the door for her and offered her his arm to lead her to the carriage. She took the arm but said nothing. Will was feeling rather vexed and miserable and found nothing to say on his side. He handed her into the carriage in silence, they said good-bye, and Dorothea drove away.

In the five minutes’ drive to the hospital she had time for some reflections that were quite new to her. Her decision to go and her preoccupation in leaving the room had come from the sudden sense that there would be a sort of deception in her voluntarily allowing any further intercourse between herself and Will which she was unable to mention to her husband, and already her errand in seeking Lydgate was a matter of concealment. That was all that had been explicitly in her mind, but she had been urged also by a vague discomfort. Now that she was alone in her drive, she heard the notes of the man’s voice and the accompanying piano, which she had not noted much at the time, returning on her inward sense; and she found herself thinking with some wonder that Will Ladislaw was passing his time with Mrs. Lydgate in her husband’s absence. And then she could not help remembering that he had passed some time with her under like circumstances, so why should there be any unfitness in the fact? But Will was Mr. Casaubon’s relative, and one towards whom she was bound to show kindness. Still there had been signs which perhaps she ought to have understood as implying that Mr. Casaubon did not like his cousin’s visits during his own absence. “Perhaps I have been mistaken in many things,” said poor Dorothea to herself, while the tears came rolling and she had to dry them quickly. She felt confusedly unhappy, and the image of Will which had been so clear to her before was mysteriously spoiled. But the carriage stopped at the gate of the hospital. She was soon walking round the grass plots with Lydgate, and her feelings recovered the strong bent which had made her seek for this interview.

Will Ladislaw, meanwhile, was mortified, and knew the reason of it clearly enough. His chances of meeting Dorothea were rare, and here for the first time there had come a chance which had set him at a disadvantage. It was not only, as it had been hitherto, that she was not supremely occupied with him, but that she had seen him under circumstances in which he might appear not to be supremely occupied with her. He felt thrust to a new distance from her, amongst the circles of Middlemarchers who made no part of her life. But that was not his fault; of course, since he had taken his lodgings in the town, he had been making as many acquaintances as he could, his position requiring that he should know everybody and everything. Lydgate was really better worth knowing than anyone else in the neighbourhood, and he happened to have a wife who was musical and altogether worth calling upon. Here was the whole history of the situation in which Diana had descended too unexpectedly on her worshipper. It was mortifying. Will was conscious that he should not have been at Middlemarch but for Dorothea, and yet his position there was threatening to divide him from her with those barriers of habitual sentiment which are more fatal to the persistence of mutual interest than all the distance between Rome and Britain. Prejudices about rank and status were easy enough to defy in the form of a tyrannical letter from Mr. Casaubon; but prejudices, like odorous bodies, have a double existence both solid and subtle—solid as the pyramids, subtle as the twentieth echo of an echo or as the memory of hyacinths which once scented the darkness. And Will was of a temperament to feel keenly the presence of subtleties: a man of clumsier perceptions would not have felt, as he did, that for the first time some sense of unfitness in perfect freedom with him had sprung up in Dorothea’s mind and that their silence, as he conducted her to the carriage, had had a chill in it. Perhaps Casaubon, in his hatred and jealousy, had been insisting to Dorothea that Will had slid below her socially. Confound Casaubon!

Will re-entered the drawing-room, took up his hat, and looking irritated as he advanced towards Mrs. Lydgate, who had seated herself at her work-table, said, “It is always fatal to have music or poetry interrupted. May I come another day and just finish about the rendering of ‘Lungi dal caro bene’?”

“I shall be happy to be taught,” said Rosamond. “But I am sure you admit that the interruption was a very beautiful one. I quite envy your acquaintance with Mrs. Casaubon. Is she very clever? She looks as if she were.”

“Really, I never thought about it,” said Will sulkily.

“That is just the answer Tertius gave me when I first asked him if she were handsome. What is it that you gentlemen are thinking of when you are with Mrs. Casaubon?”

“Herself,” said Will, not indisposed to provoke the charming Mrs. Lydgate. “When one sees a perfect woman, one never thinks of her attributes—one is conscious of her presence.”

“I shall be jealous when Tertius goes to Lowick,” said Rosamond, dimpling and speaking with aery lightness. “He will come back and think nothing of me.”

“That does not seem to have been the effect on Lydgate hitherto. Mrs. Casaubon is too unlike other women for them to be compared with her.”

“You are a devout worshipper, I perceive. You often see her, I suppose.”

“No,” said Will almost pettishly. “Worship is usually a matter of theory rather than of practice. But I am practising it to excess just at this moment—I must really tear myself away.”

“Pray come again some evening; Mr. Lydgate will like to hear the music, and I cannot enjoy it so well without him.”

When her husband was at home again, Rosamond said, standing in front of him and holding his coat-collar with both her hands, “Mr. Ladislaw was here singing with me when Mrs. Casaubon came in. He seemed vexed. Do you think he disliked her seeing him at our house? Surely your position is more than equal to his—whatever may be his relation to the Casaubons.”

“No, no; it must be something else if he were really vexed. Ladislaw is a sort of gypsy; he thinks nothing of leather and prunella.”

“Music apart, he is not always very agreeable. Do you like him?”

“Yes; I think he is a good fellow, rather miscellaneous and *bric-à-brac*, but likable.”

“Do you know, I think he adores Mrs. Casaubon.”

“Poor devil!” said Lydgate, smiling and pinching his wife’s ears.

Rosamond felt herself beginning to know a great deal of the world, especially in discovering—what when she was in her unmarried girlhood had been inconceivable to her except as a dim tragedy in bygone costumes—that women, even after marriage, might make conquests and enslave men. At that time young ladies in the country, even when educated at Mrs. Lemon’s, read little French literature later than Racine, and public prints had not cast their present magnificent illumination over the scandals of life. Still, vanity, with a woman’s whole mind and day to work in, can construct abundantly on slight hints, especially on such a hint as the possibility of indefinite conquests. How delightful to make captives from the throne of marriage with a husband as crown-prince by your side, himself in fact a subject, while the captives look up forever hopeless, losing their rest probably, and if their appetite too, so much the better! But Rosamond’s romance turned at present chiefly on her crown-prince, and it was enough to enjoy his assured subjection.

When he said, “Poor devil!” she asked with playful curiosity, “Why so?”

“Why, what can a man do when he takes to adoring one of you mermaids? He only neglects his work and runs up bills.”

“I am sure you do not neglect your work. You are always at the hospital, or seeing poor patients, or thinking about some doctor’s quarrel; and then at home you always want to pore over your microscope and phials. Confess you like those things better than me.”

“Haven’t you ambition enough to wish that your husband should be something better than a Middlemarch doctor?” said Lydgate, letting his hands fall on to his wife’s shoulders and looking at her with affectionate gravity. “I shall make you learn my favourite bit from an old poet,

> Why should our pride make such a stir to be
> And be forgot? What good is like to this,
> To do worthy the writing, and to write
> Worthy the reading and the world’s delight?

What I want, Rosy, is to do worthy the writing, and to write out myself what I have done. A man must work to do that, my pet.”

“Of course, I wish you to make discoveries; no one could more wish you to attain a high position in some better place than Middlemarch. You cannot say that I have ever tried to hinder you from working. But we cannot live like hermits. You are not discontented with me, Tertius?”

“No, dear, no. I am too entirely contented.”

“But what did Mrs. Casaubon want to say to you?”

“Merely to ask about her husband’s health. But I think she is going to be splendid to our new hospital; I think she will give us two hundred a year.”

CHAPTER 44

I would not creep along the coast, but steer
Out in mid-sea, by guidance of the stars.

When Dorothea, walking round the laurel-planted plots of the new hospital with Lydgate, had learned from him that there were no signs of change in Mr. Casaubon's bodily condition beyond the mental sign of anxiety to know the truth about his illness, she was silent for a few moments, wondering whether she had said or done anything to rouse this new anxiety. Lydgate, not willing to let slip an opportunity of furthering a favourite purpose, ventured to say, "I don't know whether your or Mr. Casaubon's attention has been drawn to the needs of our new hospital. Circumstances have made it seem rather egotistic in me to urge the subject; but that is not my fault; it is because there is a fight being made against it by the other medical men. I think you are generally interested in such things, for I remember that when I first had the pleasure of seeing you at Tipton Grange before your marriage you were asking me some questions about the way in which the health of the poor was affected by their miserable housing."

"Yes, indeed," said Dorothea, brightening. "I shall be quite grateful to you if you will tell me how I can help to make things a little better. Everything of that sort has slipped away from me since I have been married. I mean," she said after a moment's hesitation, "that the people in our village are tolerably comfortable, and my mind has been too much taken up for me to inquire further. But here—in such a place as Middlemarch—there must be a great deal to be done."

"There is everything to be done," said Lydgate with abrupt energy. "And this hospital is a capital piece of work, due entirely to Mr. Bulstrode's exertions, and in a great degree to his money. But one man can't do everything in a scheme of this sort. Of course he looked forward to help. And now there's a mean, petty feud set up against the thing in the town by certain persons who want to make it a failure."

"What can be their reasons?" said Dorothea with naïve surprise.

"Chiefly Mr. Bulstrode's unpopularity, to begin with. Half the town would almost take trouble for the sake of thwarting him. In this stupid world most people never consider that a thing is good to be done unless it is done by their own set. I had no connexion with Bulstrode before I came here. I look at him quite impartially, and I see that he has some notions—that he has set things on foot—which I can turn to good public purpose. If a fair number of the better educated men went to work with the belief that their observations might contribute to the reform of medical doctrine and practice, we should soon see a change for the better. That's my point of view. I hold that by refusing to work with Mr. Bulstrode I should be turning my back on an opportunity of making my profession more generally serviceable."

"I quite agree with you," said Dorothea, at once fascinated by the situation sketched in Lydgate's words. "But what is there against Mr. Bulstrode? I know that my uncle is friendly with him."

"People don't like his religious tone," said Lydgate, breaking off there.

"That is all the stronger reason for despising such an opposition," said Dorothea, looking at the affairs of Middlemarch by the light of the great persecutions.

"To put the matter quite fairly, they have other objections to him: he is masterful and rather unsociable, and he is concerned with trade, which has complaints of its own that I know nothing about. But what has that to do with the question whether it would not be a fine thing to establish here a more valuable hospital than any they have in the county? The immediate motive to the opposition, however, is the fact that Bulstrode has put the medical direction into my hands. Of course I am glad of that. It gives me an opportunity of doing some good work, and I am aware that I have to justify his choice of me. But the consequence is that the whole profession in Middlemarch have set themselves tooth and nail against the hospital, and not only refuse to cooperate themselves, but try to blacken the whole affair and hinder subscriptions."

"How very petty!" exclaimed Dorothea indignantly.

"I suppose one must expect to fight one's way; there is hardly anything to be done without it. And the ignorance of people about here is stupendous. I don't lay claim to anything else than having used some opportunities which have not come within everybody's reach; but there is no stifling the offence of being young, and a new-comer, and happening to know something more than the old inhabitants. Still, if I believe that I can set going a better method of treatment—if I believe that I can pursue certain observations and inquiries which may be a lasting benefit to medical practice, I should be a base truckler if I allowed any consideration of personal comfort to hinder me. And the course is all the clearer from there being no salary in question to put my persistence in an equivocal light."

"I am glad you have told me this, Mr. Lydgate," said Dorothea cordially. "I feel sure I can help a little. I have some money and don't know what to do with it—that is often an uncomfortable thought to me. I am sure I can spare two hundred a year for a grand purpose like this. How happy you must be to know things that you feel sure will do great good! I wish I could awake with that knowledge every morning. There seems to be so much trouble taken that one can hardly see the good of!"

There was a melancholy cadence in Dorothea's voice as she spoke these last words. But she presently added, more cheerfully, "Pray come to Lowick and tell us more of this. I will mention the subject to Mr. Casaubon. I must hasten home now."

She did mention it that evening, and said that she should like to subscribe two hundred a year—she had seven hundred a year as the equivalent of her own fortune, settled on her at her marriage. Mr. Casaubon made no objection beyond a passing remark that the sum might be disproportionate in relation to other good objects, but when Dorothea in her ignorance resisted that suggestion, he acquiesced. He did not care himself about spending money and was not reluctant to give it. If he ever felt keenly any question of money it was through the medium of another passion than the love of material property.

Dorothea told him that she had seen Lydgate, and recited the gist of her conversation with him about the hospital. Mr. Casaubon did not question her further, but he felt sure that she had wished to know what had passed between Lydgate and himself. “She knows that I know,” said the ever-restless voice within; but that increase of tacit knowledge only thrust further off any confidence between them. He distrusted her affection, and what loneliness is more lonely than distrust?

CHAPTER 45

> It is the humour of many heads to extol the days of their forefathers, and declaim against the wickedness of times present. Which notwithstanding they cannot handsomely do, without the borrowed help and satire of times past; condemning the vices of their own times, by the expressions of vices in times which they commend, which cannot but argue the community of vice in both. Horace, therefore, Juvenal, and Persius, were no prophets, although their lines did seem to indigitate and point at our times.
>
> —SIR THOMAS BROWNE: *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*

That opposition to the New Fever Hospital which Lydgate had sketched to Dorothea was, like other oppositions, to be viewed in many different lights. He regarded it as a mixture of jealousy and dunder-headed prejudice. Mr. Bulstrode saw in it not only medical jealousy but a determination to thwart himself, prompted mainly by a hatred of that vital religion of which he had striven to be an effectual lay representative—a hatred which certainly found pretexts apart from religion such as were only too easy to find in the entanglements of human action. These might be called the ministerial views. But oppositions have the illimitable range of objections at command, which need never stop short at the boundary of knowledge, but can draw forever on the vasts of ignorance. What the opposition in Middlemarch said about the new hospital and its administration had certainly a great deal of echo in it, for heaven has taken care that everybody shall not be an originator; but there were differences which represented every social shade between the polished moderation of Dr. Minchin and the trenchant assertion of Mrs. Dollop, the landlady of the Tankard in Slaughter Lane.

Mrs. Dollop became more and more convinced by her own asseveration, that Doctor Lydgate meant to let the people die in the hospital, if not to poison them, for the sake of cutting them up without saying by your leave or with your leave; for it was a known "fac" that he had wanted to cut up Mrs. Goby, as respectable a woman as any in Parley Street, who had money in trust before her marriage—a poor tale for a doctor, who if he was good for anything should know what was the matter with you before you died and not want to pry into your inside after you were gone. If that was not reason, Mrs. Dollop wished to know what was; but there was a prevalent feeling in her audience that her opinion was a bulwark and that if it were overthrown there would be no limits to the cutting up of bodies, as had been well seen in Burke and Hare with their pitch-plaisters—such a hanging business as that was not wanted in Middlemarch!

And let it not be supposed that opinion at the Tankard in Slaughter Lane was unimportant to the medical profession: that old authentic public-house—the original Tankard, known by the name of Dollop's—was the resort of a great Benefit Club, which had some months before put to the vote whether its long-standing medical man, "Doctor Gambit," should not be cashiered in favour of "this Doctor Lydgate," who was capable of performing the most astonishing cures and rescuing people altogether given up by other practitioners. But the balance had been turned against Lydgate by two members, who for some private reasons held that this power of resuscitating persons as good as dead was an equivocal recommendation and might interfere with providential favours. In the course of the year, however, there had been a change in the public sentiment, of which the unanimity at Dollop's was an index.

A good deal more than a year ago, before anything was known of Lydgate's skill, the judgements on it had naturally been divided, depending on a sense of likelihood, situated perhaps in the pit of the stomach or in the pineal gland, and differing in its verdicts, but not the less valuable as a guide in the total deficit of evidence. Patients who had chronic diseases or whose lives had long been worn threadbare, like old Featherstone's, had been at once inclined to try him; also, many who did not like paying their doctor's bills thought agreeably of opening an account with a new doctor and sending for him without stint if the children's temper wanted a dose, occasions when the old practitioners were often crusty; and all persons thus inclined to employ Lydgate held it likely that he was clever. Some considered that he might do more than others "where there was liver"—at least there would be no harm in getting a few bottles of "stuff" from him, since if these proved useless it would still be possible to return to the Purifying Pills, which kept you alive if they did not remove the yellowness. But these were people of minor importance. Good Middlemarch families were of course not going to change their doctor without reason shown; and everybody who had employed Mr. Peacock did not feel obliged to accept a new man merely in the character of his successor, objecting that he was "not likely to be equal to Peacock."

But Lydgate had not been long in the town before there were particulars enough reported of him to breed much more specific expectations and to intensify differences into partisanship, some of the particulars being of that impressive order of which the significance is entirely hidden, like a statistical amount without a standard of comparison but with a note of exclamation at the end. The cubic feet of oxygen yearly swallowed by a full-grown man—what a shudder they might have created in some Middlemarch circles! "Oxygen! Nobody knows what that may be—is it any wonder the cholera has got to Dantzic? And yet there are people who say quarantine is no good!"

One of the facts quickly rumoured was that Lydgate did not dispense drugs. This was offensive both to the physicians whose exclusive distinction seemed infringed on and to the surgeon-apothecaries with whom he ranged himself; and only a little while before, they might have counted on having the law on their side against a man who without calling himself a London-made M.D. dared to ask for pay except as a charge on drugs. But Lydgate had not been experienced enough to foresee that his new course would be even more offensive to the laity; and to Mr. Mawmsey, an important grocer in the Top Market, who, though not one of his patients, questioned him in an affable manner on the subject, he was injudicious

enough to give a hasty, popular explanation of his reasons, pointing out to Mr. Mawmsey that it must lower the character of practitioners and be a constant injury to the public if their only mode of getting paid for their work was by their making out long bills for draughts, boluses, and mixtures.

"It is in that way that hard-working medical men may come to be almost as mischievous as quacks," said Lydgate rather thoughtlessly. "To get their own bread they must overdose the king's lieges; and that's a bad sort of treason, Mr. Mawmsey —undermines the constitution in a fatal way."

Mr. Mawmsey was not only an overseer (it was about a question of outdoor pay that he was having an interview with Lydgate), he was also asthmatic and had an increasing family; thus, from a medical point of view, as well as from his own, he was an important man; indeed, an exceptional grocer whose hair was arranged in a flamelike pyramid and whose retail deference was of the cordial, encouraging kind—jocosely complimentary and with a certain considerate abstinence from letting out the full force of his mind. It was Mr. Mawmsey's friendly jocoseness in questioning him which had set the tone of Lydgate's reply. But let the wise be warned against too great readiness at explanation: it multiplies the sources of mistake, lengthening the sum for reckoners sure to go wrong.

Lydgate smiled as he ended his speech, putting his foot into the stirrup, and Mr. Mawmsey laughed more than he would have done if he had known who the king's lieges were, giving his "Good morning, sir; good morning, sir," with the air of one who saw everything clearly enough. But in truth his views were perturbed. For years he had been paying bills with strictly made items so that for every half-crown and eighteenpence he was certain something measurable had been delivered. He had done this with satisfaction, including it among his responsibilities as a husband and father and regarding a longer bill than usual as a dignity worth mentioning. Moreover, in addition to the massive benefit of the drugs to "self and family," he had enjoyed the pleasure of forming an acute judgement as to their immediate effects, so as to give an intelligent statement for the guidance of Mr. Gambit, a practitioner just a little lower in status than Wrench or Toller and especially esteemed as an accoucheur, of whose ability Mr. Mawmsey had the poorest opinion on all other points, but in doctoring, he was wont to say in an undertone, he placed Gambit above any of them.

Here were deeper reasons than the superficial talk of a new man, which appeared still flimsier in the drawing-room over the shop when they were recited to Mrs. Mawmsey, a woman accustomed to be made much of as a fertile mother—generally under attendance more or less frequent from Mr. Gambit, and occasionally having attacks which required Dr. Minchin.

"Does this Mr. Lydgate mean to say there is no use in taking medicine?" said Mrs. Mawmsey, who was slightly given to drawling. "I should like him to tell me how I could bear up at Fair time if I didn't take strengthening medicine for a month beforehand. Think of what I have to provide for calling customers, my dear!" Here Mrs. Mawmsey turned to an intimate female friend who sat by, "A large veal pie, a stuffed fillet, a round of beef, ham, tongue, *et* cetera, *et* cetera! But what keeps me up best is the pink mixture, not the brown. I wonder, Mr. Mawmsey, with *your* experience, you could have patience to listen. *I* should have told him at once that I knew a little better than that."

"No, no, no," said Mr. Mawmsey; "I was not going to tell him my opinion. Hear everything and judge for yourself is my motto. But he didn't know who he was talking to. I was not to be turned on *his* finger. People often pretend to tell me things, when they might as well say, 'Mawmsey, you're a fool.' But I smile at it; I humour everybody's weak place. If physic had done harm to self and family, I should have found it out by this time."

The next day Mr. Gambit was told that Lydgate went about saying physic was of no use.

"Indeed!" said he, lifting his eyebrows with cautious surprise. (He was a stout, husky man with a large ring on his fourth finger.) "How will he cure his patients, then?"

"That is what *I* say," returned Mrs. Mawmsey, who habitually gave weight to her speech by loading her pronouns. "Does *he* suppose that people will pay him only to come and sit with them and go away again?"

Mrs. Mawmsey had had a great deal of sitting from Mr. Gambit, including very full accounts of his own habits of body and other affairs; but of course he knew there was no innuendo in her remark, since his spare time and personal narrative had never been charged for. So he replied humorously, "Well, Lydgate is a good-looking young fellow, you know."

"Not one that *I* would employ," said Mrs. Mawmsey. "*Others* may do as they please."

Hence Mr. Gambit could go away from the chief grocer's without fear of rivalry, but not without a sense that Lydgate was one of those hypocrites who try to discredit others by advertising their own honesty, and that it might be worth some people's while to show him up. Mr. Gambit, however, had a satisfactory practice, much pervaded by the smells of retail trading, which suggested the reduction of cash payments to a balance. And he did not think it worth his while to show Lydgate up until he knew how. He had not indeed great resources of education and had had to work his own way against a good deal of professional contempt, but he made none the worse accoucheur for calling the breathing apparatus "longs."

Other medical men felt themselves more capable. Mr. Toller shared the highest practice in the town and belonged to an old Middlemarch family; there were Tollers in the law and everything else above the line of retail trade. Unlike our irascible friend Wrench, he had the easiest way in the world of taking things which might be supposed to annoy him, being a well-bred, quietly facetious man who kept a good house, was very fond of a little sporting when he could get it, very friendly with Mr. Hawley, and hostile to Mr. Bulstrode. It may seem odd that with such pleasant habits he should have been given to the heroic treatment, bleeding and blistering and starving his patients, with a dispassionate disregard to his personal example; but the incongruity favoured the opinion of his ability among his patients, who commonly observed that Mr. Toller had lazy manners but his treatment was as active as you could desire; no man, said they, carried more seriousness into his profession: he was a little slow in coming, but when he came, he *did* something. He was a great favourite in his own circle, and whatever he implied to anyone's disadvantage told doubly from his careless, ironical tone.

He naturally got tired of smiling and saying, "Ah!" when he was told that Mr. Peacock's successor did not mean to dispense medicines; and Mr. Hackbutt one day mentioning it over the wine at a dinner-party, Mr. Toller said laughingly, "Dibbitts will get rid of his stale drugs, then. I'm fond of little Dibbitts—I'm glad he's in luck."

"I see your meaning, Toller," said Mr. Hackbutt, "and I am entirely of your opinion. I shall take an opportunity of expressing myself to that effect. A medical man should be responsible for the quality of the drugs consumed by his patients.

That is the *rationale* of the system of charging which has hitherto obtained; and nothing is more offensive than this ostentation of reform, where there is no real amelioration."

"Ostentation, Hackbutt?" said Mr. Toller ironically. "I don't see that. A man can't very well be ostentatious of what nobody believes in. There's no reform in the matter; the question is whether the profit on the drugs is paid to the medical man by the druggist or by the patient, and whether there shall be extra pay under the name of attendance."

"Ah, to be sure; one of your damned new versions of old humbug," said Mr. Hawley, passing the decanter to Mr. Wrench.

Mr. Wrench, generally abstemious, often drank wine rather freely at a party, getting the more irritable in consequence.

"As to humbug, Hawley," he said, "that's a word easy to fling about. But what I contend against is the way medical men are fouling their own nest and setting up a cry about the country as if a general practitioner who dispenses drugs couldn't be a gentleman. I throw back the imputation with scorn. I say the most ungentlemanly trick a man can be guilty of is to come among the members of his profession with innovations which are a libel on their time-honoured procedure. That is my opinion, and I am ready to maintain it against anyone who contradicts me." Mr. Wrench's voice had become exceedingly sharp.

"I can't oblige you there, Wrench," said Mr. Hawley, thrusting his hands into his trouser pockets.

"My dear fellow," said Mr. Toller, striking in pacifically and looking at Mr. Wrench, "the physicians have their toes trodden on more than we have. If you come to dignity it is a question for Minchin and Sprague."

"Does medical jurisprudence provide nothing against these infringements?" said Mr. Hackbutt with a disinterested desire to offer his lights. "How does the law stand, eh, Hawley?"

"Nothing to be done there," said Mr. Hawley. "I looked into it for Sprague. You'd only break your nose against a damned judge's decision."

"Pooh! No need of law," said Mr. Toller. "So far as practice is concerned, the attempt is an absurdity. No patient will like it—certainly not Peacock's, who have been used to depletion. Pass the wine."

Mr. Toller's prediction was partly verified. If Mr. and Mrs. Mawmsey, who had no idea of employing Lydgate, were made uneasy by his supposed declaration against drugs, it was inevitable that those who called him in should watch a little anxiously to see whether he did "use all the means he might use" in the case. Even good Mr. Powderell, who in his constant charity of interpretation was inclined to esteem Lydgate the more for what seemed a conscientious pursuit of a better plan, had his mind disturbed with doubts during his wife's attack of erysipelas and could not abstain from mentioning to Lydgate that Mr. Peacock on a similar occasion had administered a series of boluses which were not otherwise definable than by their remarkable effect in bringing Mrs. Powderell round before Michaelmas from an illness which had begun in a remarkably hot August. At last, indeed, in the conflict between his desire not to hurt Lydgate and his anxiety that no "means" should be lacking, he induced his wife privately to take Widgeon's Purifying Pills, an esteemed Middlemarch medicine which arrested every disease at the fountain by setting to work at once upon the blood. This cooperative measure was not to be mentioned to Lydgate, and Mr. Powderell himself had no certain reliance on it, only hoping that it might be attended with a blessing.

But in this doubtful stage of Lydgate's introduction he was helped by what we mortals rashly call good fortune. I suppose no doctor ever came newly to a place without making cures that surprised somebody—cures which may be called fortune's testimonials and deserve as much credit as the written or printed kind. Various patients got well while Lydgate was attending them, some even of dangerous illnesses; and it was remarked that the new doctor with his new ways had at least the merit of bringing people back from the brink of death. The trash talked on such occasions was the more vexatious to Lydgate because it gave precisely the sort of prestige which an incompetent and unscrupulous man would desire, and was sure to be imputed to him by the simmering dislike of the other medical men as an encouragement on his own part of ignorant puffing. But even his proud outspokenness was checked by the discernment that it was as useless to fight against the interpretations of ignorance as to whip the fog; and "good fortune" insisted on using those interpretations.

Mrs. Larcher, having just become charitably concerned about alarming symptoms in her charwoman when Dr. Minchin called, asked him to see her then and there and to give her a certificate for the infirmary; whereupon after examination he wrote a statement of the case as one of tumour and recommended the bearer Nancy Nash as an out-patient. Nancy, calling at home on her way to the infirmary, allowed the staymaker and his wife in whose attic she lodged to read Dr. Minchin's paper and by this means became a subject of compassionate conversation in the neighbouring shops of Churchyard Lane as being afflicted with a tumour at first declared to be as large and hard as a duck's egg, but later in the day to be about the size of "your fist." Most hearers agreed that it would have to be cut out, but one had known of oil and another of "squitchineal" as adequate to soften and reduce any lump in the body when taken enough of into the inside—the oil by gradually "soopling," the squitchineal by eating away.

Meanwhile, when Nancy presented herself at the infirmary, it happened to be one of Lydgate's days there. After questioning and examining her, Lydgate said to the house-surgeon in an undertone, "It's not tumour; it's cramp." He ordered her a blister and some steel mixture and told her to go home and rest, giving her at the same time a note to Mrs. Larcher, who, she said, was her best employer, to testify that she was in need of good food.

But by and by Nancy, in her attic, became portentously worse, the supposed tumour having indeed given way to the blister, but only wandered to another region with angrier pain. The staymaker's wife went to fetch Lydgate, and he continued for a fortnight to attend Nancy in her own home until under his treatment she got quite well and went to work again. But the case continued to be described as one of tumour in Churchyard Lane and other streets—nay, by Mrs. Larcher also; for when Lydgate's remarkable cure was mentioned to Dr. Minchin, he naturally did not like to say, "The case was not one of tumour, and I was mistaken in describing it as such," but answered, "Indeed! Ah! I saw it was a surgical case, not of a fatal kind." He had been inwardly annoyed, however, when he had asked at the infirmary about the woman he had recommended two days before, to hear from the house-surgeon, a youngster who was not sorry to vex Minchin with impunity, exactly what had occurred: he privately pronounced that it was indecent in a general practitioner to contradict a physician's diagnosis in that open manner, and afterwards agreed with Wrench that Lydgate was disagreeably inattentive

to etiquette. Lydgate did not make the affair a ground for valuing himself or (very particularly) despising Minchin, such rectification of misjudgements often happening among men of equal qualifications. But report took up this amazing case of tumour, not clearly distinguished from cancer, and considered the more awful for being of the wandering sort, till much prejudice against Lydgate's method as to drugs was overcome by the proof of his marvellous skill in the speedy restoration of Nancy Nash after she had been rolling and rolling in agonies from the presence of a tumour both hard and obstinate, but nevertheless compelled to yield.

How could Lydgate help himself? It is offensive to tell a lady when she is expressing her amazement at your skill that she is altogether mistaken and rather foolish in her amazement. And to have entered into the nature of diseases would only have added to his breaches of medical propriety. Thus he had to wince under a promise of success given by that ignorant praise which misses every valid quality.

In the case of a more conspicuous patient, Mr. Borthrop Trumbull, Lydgate was conscious of having shown himself something better than an everyday doctor, though here too it was an equivocal advantage that he won. The eloquent auctioneer was seized with pneumonia, and having been a patient of Mr. Peacock's, sent for Lydgate, whom he had expressed his intention to patronize. Mr. Trumbull was a robust man, a good subject for trying the expectant theory upon—watching the course of an interesting disease when left as much as possible to itself so that the stages might be noted for future guidance; and from the air with which he described his sensations, Lydgate surmised that he would like to be taken into his medical man's confidence and be represented as a partner in his own cure. The auctioneer heard, without much surprise, that his was a constitution which (always with due watching) might be left to itself so as to offer a beautiful example of a disease with all its phases seen in clear delineation and that he probably had the rare strength of mind voluntarily to become the test of a rational procedure, and thus make the disorder of his pulmonary functions a general benefit to society.

Mr. Trumbull acquiesced at once and entered strongly into the view that an illness of his was no ordinary occasion for medical science.

"Never fear, sir; you are not speaking to one who is altogether ignorant of the *vis medicatrix*," said he with his usual superiority of expression, made rather pathetic by difficulty of breathing. And he went without shrinking through his abstinence from drugs, much sustained by application of the thermometer, which implied the importance of his temperature, by the sense that he furnished objects for the microscope, and by learning many new words which seemed suited to the dignity of his secretions. For Lydgate was acute enough to indulge him with a little technical talk.

It may be imagined that Mr. Trumbull rose from his couch with a disposition to speak of an illness in which he had manifested the strength of his mind as well as constitution; and he was not backward in awarding credit to the medical man who had discerned the quality of patient he had to deal with. The auctioneer was not an ungenerous man and liked to give others their due, feeling that he could afford it. He had caught the words "expectant method," and rang chimes on this and other learned phrases to accompany the assurance that Lydgate "knew a thing or two more than the rest of the doctors—was far better versed in the secrets of his profession than the majority of his compeers."

This had happened before the affair of Fred Vincy's illness had given to Mr. Wrench's enmity towards Lydgate more definite personal ground. The new-comer already threatened to be a nuisance in the shape of rivalry, and was certainly a nuisance in the shape of practical criticism or reflections on his hard-driven elders, who had had something else to do than to busy themselves with untried notions. His practice had spread in one or two quarters, and from the first the report of his high family had led to his being pretty generally invited, so that the other medical men had to meet him at dinner in the best houses; and having to meet a man whom you dislike is not observed always to end in a mutual attachment. There was hardly ever so much unanimity among them as in the opinion that Lydgate was an arrogant young fellow, and yet ready for the sake of ultimately predominating to show a crawling subservience to Bulstrode. That Mr. Farebrother, whose name was a chief flag of the anti-Bulstrode party, always defended Lydgate and made a friend of him was referred to Farebrother's unaccountable way of fighting on both sides.

Here was plenty of preparation for the outburst of professional disgust at the announcement of the laws Mr. Bulstrode was laying down for the direction of the new hospital, which were the more exasperating because there was no present possibility of interfering with his will and pleasure, everybody except Lord Medlicote having refused help towards the building on the ground that they preferred giving to the old infirmary. Mr. Bulstrode met all the expenses and had ceased to be sorry that he was purchasing the right to carry out his notions of improvement without hindrance from prejudiced coadjutors; but he had had to spend large sums, and the building had lingered. Caleb Garth had undertaken it, had failed during its progress, and before the interior fittings were begun had retired from the management of the business; and when referring to the hospital, he often said that however Bulstrode might ring if you tried him, he liked good solid carpentry and masonry and had a notion both of drains and chimneys. In fact, the hospital had become an object of intense interest to Bulstrode, and he would willingly have continued to spare a large yearly sum that he might rule it dictatorially without any board; but he had another favourite object which also required money for its accomplishment: he wished to buy some land in the neighbourhood of Middlemarch, and therefore he wished to get considerable contributions towards maintaining the hospital. Meanwhile, he framed his plan of management. The hospital was to be reserved for fever in all its forms; Lydgate was to be chief medical superintendent that he might have free authority to pursue all comparative investigations which his studies, particularly in Paris, had shown him the importance of, the other medical visitors having a consultative influence but no power to contravene Lydgate's ultimate decisions; and the general management was to be lodged exclusively in the hands of five directors associated with Mr. Bulstrode, who were to have votes in the ratio of their contributions, the board itself filling up any vacancy in its members, and no mob of small contributors being admitted to a share of government.

There was an immediate refusal on the part of every medical man in the town to become a visitor at the Fever Hospital.

"Very well," said Lydgate to Mr. Bulstrode, "we have a capital house-surgeon and dispenser, a clear-headed, neat-handed fellow; we'll get Webbe from Crabsley, as good a country practitioner as any of them, to come over twice a week; and in case of any exceptional operation, Protheroe will come from Brassing. I must work the harder, that's all, and I have given

up my post at the infirmary. The plan will flourish in spite of them, and then they'll be glad to come in. Things can't last as they are: there must be all sorts of reform soon, and then young fellows may be glad to come and study here." Lydgate was in high spirits.

"I shall not flinch, you may depend upon it, Mr. Lydgate," said Mr. Bulstrode. "While I see you carrying out high intentions with vigour, you shall have my unfailing support. And I have humble confidence that the blessing which has hitherto attended my efforts against the spirit of evil in this town will not be withdrawn. Suitable directors to assist me I have no doubt in securing. Mr. Brooke of Tipton has already given me his concurrence and a pledge to contribute yearly; he has not specified the sum—probably not a great one. But he will be a useful member of the board."

A useful member was perhaps to be defined as one who would originate nothing and always vote with Mr. Bulstrode.

The medical aversion to Lydgate was hardly disguised now. Neither Dr. Sprague nor Dr. Minchin said that he disliked Lydgate's knowledge or his disposition to improve treatment: what they disliked was his arrogance, which nobody felt to be altogether deniable. They implied that he was insolent, pretentious, and given to that reckless innovation for the sake of noise and show which was the essence of the charlatan.

The word charlatan once thrown on the air could not be let drop. In those days the world was agitated about the wondrous doings of Mr. St. John Long, "noblemen and gentlemen" attesting his extraction of a fluid like mercury from the temples of a patient.

Mr. Toller remarked one day, smilingly, to Mrs. Taft that "Bulstrode had found a man to suit him in Lydgate; a charlatan in religion is sure to like other sorts of charlatans."

"Yes, indeed, I can imagine," said Mrs. Taft, keeping the number of thirty stitches carefully in her mind all the while; "there are so many of that sort. I remember Mr. Cheshire, with his irons, trying to make people straight when the Almighty had made them crooked."

"No, no," said Mr. Toller, "Cheshire was all right—all fair and above board. But there's St. John Long—that's the kind of fellow we call a charlatan, advertising cures in ways nobody knows anything about; a fellow who wants to make a noise by pretending to go deeper than other people. The other day he was pretending to tap a man's brain and get quicksilver out of it."

"Good gracious! What dreadful trifling with people's constitutions!" said Mrs. Taft.

After this, it came to be held in various quarters that Lydgate played even with respectable constitutions for his own purposes, and how much more likely that in his flighty experimenting he should make sixes and sevens of hospital patients. Especially it was to be expected, as the landlady of the Tankard had said, that he would recklessly cut up their dead bodies. For Lydgate, having attended Mrs. Goby, who died apparently of a heart-disease not very clearly expressed in the symptoms, too daringly asked leave of her relatives to open the body, and thus gave an offence quickly spreading beyond Parley Street, where that lady had long resided on an income such as made this association of her body with the victims of Burke and Hare a flagrant insult to her memory.

Affairs were in this stage when Lydgate opened the subject of the hospital to Dorothea. We see that he was bearing enmity and silly misconception with much spirit, aware that they were partly created by his good share of success.

"They will not drive me away," he said, talking confidentially in Mr. Farebrother's study. "I have got a good opportunity here for the ends I care most about, and I am pretty sure to get income enough for our wants. By and by I shall go on as quietly as possible; I have no seductions now away from home and work. And I am more and more convinced that it will be possible to demonstrate the homogeneous origin of all the tissues. Raspail and others are on the same track, and I have been losing time."

"I have no power of prophecy there," said Mr. Farebrother, who had been puffing at his pipe thoughtfully while Lydgate talked; "but as to the hostility in the town, you'll weather it if you are prudent."

"How am I to be prudent?" said Lydgate. "I just do what comes before me to do. I can't help people's ignorance and spite any more than Vesalius could. It isn't possible to square one's conduct to silly conclusions which nobody can foresee."

"Quite true; I didn't mean that. I meant only two things. One is, keep yourself as separable from Bulstrode as you can: of course, you can go on doing good work of your own by his help; but don't get tied. Perhaps it seems like personal feeling in me to say so—and there's a good deal of that, I own—but personal feeling is not always in the wrong if you boil it down to the impressions which make it simply an opinion."

"Bulstrode is nothing to me," said Lydgate carelessly, "except on public grounds. As to getting very closely united to him, I am not fond enough of him for that. But what was the other thing you meant?" said Lydgate, who was nursing his leg as comfortably as possible and feeling in no great need of advice.

"Why, this. Take care—*experto crede*—take care not to get hampered about money matters. I know, by a word you let fall one day, that you don't like my playing at cards so much for money. You are right enough there. But try and keep clear of wanting small sums that you haven't got. I am perhaps talking rather superfluously, but a man likes to assume superiority over himself by holding up his bad example and sermonizing on it."

Lydgate took Mr. Farebrother's hints very cordially, though he would hardly have borne them from another man. He could not help remembering that he had lately made some debts, but these had seemed inevitable, and he had no intention now to do more than keep house in a simple way. The furniture for which he owed would not want renewing, nor even the stock of wine for a long while.

Many thoughts cheered him at that time—and justly. A man conscious of enthusiasm for worthy aims is sustained under petty hostilities by the memory of great workers who had to fight their way, not without wounds, and who hover in his mind as patron saints, invisibly helping. At home, that same evening when he had been chatting with Mr. Farebrother, he had his long legs stretched on the sofa, his head thrown back, and his hands clasped behind it according to his favourite ruminating attitude, while Rosamond sat at the piano and played one tune after another, of which her husband only knew (like the emotional elephant he was!) that they fell in with his mood as if they had been melodious sea-breezes.

There was something very fine in Lydgate's look just then, and anyone might have been encouraged to bet on his achievement. In his dark eyes and on his mouth and brow there was that placidity which comes from the fulness of

contemplative thought—the mind not searching, but beholding, and the glance seeming to be filled with what is behind it.

Presently Rosamond left the piano and seated herself on a chair close to the sofa and opposite her husband's face.

"Is that enough music for you, my lord?" she said, folding her hands before her and putting on a little air of meekness.

"Yes, dear, if you are tired," said Lydgate gently, turning his eyes and resting them on her, but not otherwise moving. Rosamond's presence at that moment was perhaps no more than a spoonful brought to the lake, and her woman's instinct in this matter was not dull.

"What is absorbing you?" she said, leaning forward and bringing her face nearer to his.

He moved his hands and placed them gently behind her shoulders.

"I am thinking of a great fellow who was about as old as I am three hundred years ago and had already begun a new era in anatomy."

"I can't guess," said Rosamond, shaking her head. "We used to play at guessing historical characters at Mrs. Lemon's, but not anatomists."

"I'll tell you. His name was Vesalius. And the only way he could get to know anatomy as he did was by going to snatch bodies at night from graveyards and places of execution."

"Oh!" said Rosamond with a look of disgust on her pretty face. "I am very glad you are not Vesalius. I should have thought he might find some less horrible way than that."

"No, he couldn't," said Lydgate, going on too earnestly to take much notice of her answer. "He could only get a complete skeleton by snatching the whitened bones of a criminal from the gallows, and burying them, and fetching them away by bits secretly in the dead of night."

"I hope he is not one of your great heroes," said Rosamond, half playfully, half anxiously, "else I shall have you getting up in the night to go to St. Peter's churchyard. You know how angry you told me the people were about Mrs. Goby. You have enemies enough already."

"So had Vesalius, Rosy. No wonder the medical fogies in Middlemarch are jealous, when some of the greatest doctors living were fierce upon Vesalius because they had believed in Galen, and he showed that Galen was wrong. They called him a liar and a poisonous monster. But the facts of the human frame were on his side, and so he got the better of them."

"And what happened to him afterwards?" said Rosamond with some interest.

"Oh, he had a good deal of fighting to the last. And they did exasperate him enough at one time to make him burn a good deal of his work. Then he got shipwrecked just as he was coming from Jerusalem to take a great chair at Padua. He died rather miserably."

There was a moment's pause before Rosamond said, "Do you know, Tertius, I often wish you had not been a medical man."

"Nay, Rosy, don't say that," said Lydgate, drawing her closer to him. "That is like saying you wish you had married another man."

"Not at all; you are clever enough for anything: you might easily have been something else. And your cousins at Quallingham all think that you have sunk below them in your choice of a profession."

"The cousins at Quallingham may go to the devil!" said Lydgate with scorn. "It was like their impudence, if they said anything of the sort to you."

"Still," said Rosamond, "I do *not* think it is a nice profession, dear." We know that she had much quiet perseverance in her opinion.

"It is the grandest profession in the world, Rosamond," said Lydgate gravely. "And to say that you love me without loving the medical man in me is the same sort of thing as to say that you like eating a peach but don't like its flavour. Don't say that again, dear; it pains me."

"Very well, Doctor Grave-face," said Rosy, dimpling, "I will declare in future that I dote on skeletons, and body-snatchers, and bits of things in phials, and quarrels with everybody, that end in your dying miserably."

"No, no, not so bad as that," said Lydgate, giving up remonstrance and petting her resignedly.

CHAPTER 46

Pues no podemos haber aquello que queremos, queramos aquello que podremos.
Since we cannot get what we like, let us like what we can get.

—SPANISH PROVERB

While Lydgate, safely married and with the hospital under his command, felt himself struggling for medical reform against Middlemarch, Middlemarch was becoming more and more conscious of the national struggle for another kind of reform.

By the time that Lord John Russell's measure was being debated in the House of Commons, there was a new political animation in Middlemarch and a new definition of parties which might show a decided change of balance if a new election came. And there were some who already predicted this event, declaring that a reform bill would never be carried by the actual Parliament. This was what Will Ladislaw dwelt on to Mr. Brooke as a reason for congratulation that he had not yet tried his strength at the hustings.

"Things will grow and ripen as if it were a comet year," said Will. "The public temper will soon get to a cometary heat now the question of reform has set in. There is likely to be another election before long, and by that time Middlemarch will have got more ideas into its head. What we have to work at now is the *Pioneer* and political meetings."

"Quite right, Ladislaw; we shall make a new thing of opinion here," said Mr. Brooke. "Only I want to keep myself independent about reform, you know: I don't want to go too far. I want to take up Wilberforce's and Romilly's line, you know, and work at Negro emancipation, criminal law—that kind of thing. But of course I should support Grey."

"If you go in for the principle of reform, you must be prepared to take what the situation offers," said Will. "If everybody pulled for his own bit against everybody else, the whole question would go to tatters."

"Yes, yes, I agree with you—I quite take that point of view. I should put it in that light. I should support Grey, you know. But I don't want to change the balance of the constitution, and I don't think Grey would."

"But that is what the country wants," said Will. "Else there would be no meaning in political unions or any other movement that knows what it's about. It wants to have a House of Commons which is not weighted with nominees of the landed class, but with representatives of the other interests. And as to contending for a reform short of that, it is like asking for a bit of an avalanche which has already begun to thunder."

"That is fine, Ladislaw; that is the way to put it. Write that down, now. We must begin to get documents about the feeling of the country, as well as the machine-breaking and general distress."

"As to documents," said Will, "a two-inch card will hold plenty. A few rows of figures are enough to deduce misery from, and a few more will show the rate at which the political determination of the people is growing."

"Good; draw that out a little more at length, Ladislaw. That is an idea, now; write it out in the *Pioneer*. Put the figures and deduce the misery, you know; and put the other figures and deduce—and so on. You have a way of putting things. Burke, now—when I think of Burke, I can't help wishing somebody had a pocket-borough to give you, Ladislaw. You'd never get elected, you know. And we shall always want talent in the House; reform as we will, we shall always want talent. That avalanche and the thunder, now, was really a little like Burke. I want that sort of thing—not ideas, you know, but a way of putting them."

"Pocket-boroughs would be a fine thing," said Ladislaw, "if they were always in the right pocket and there were always a Burke at hand."

Will was not displeased with that complimentary comparison, even from Mr. Brooke; for it is a little too trying to human flesh to be conscious of expressing one's self better than others and never to have it noticed, and in the general dearth of admiration for the right thing, even a chance bray of applause falling exactly in time is rather fortifying. Will felt that his literary refinements were usually beyond the limits of Middlemarch perception; nevertheless, he was beginning thoroughly to like the work of which when he began he had said to himself rather languidly, "Why not?"—and he studied the political situation with as ardent an interest as he had ever given to poetic metres or mediaevalism. It is undeniable that but for the desire to be where Dorothea was, and perhaps the want of knowing what else to do, Will would not at this time have been meditating on the needs of the English people or criticizing English statesmanship; he would probably have been rambling in Italy sketching plans for several dramas, trying prose and finding it too jejune, trying verse and finding it too artificial, beginning to copy "bits" from old pictures, leaving off because they were "no good," and observing that, after all, self-culture was the principal point; while in politics he would have been sympathizing warmly with liberty and progress in general. Our sense of duty must often wait for some work which shall take the place of dilettantism and make us feel that the quality of our action is not a matter of indifference.

Ladislaw had now accepted his bit of work, though it was not that indeterminate loftiest thing which he had once dreamed of as alone worthy of continuous effort. His nature warmed easily in the presence of subjects which were visibly mixed with life and action, and the easily stirred rebellion in him helped the glow of public spirit. In spite of Mr. Casaubon and the banishment from Lowick, he was rather happy, getting a great deal of fresh knowledge in a vivid way and for practical purposes, and making the *Pioneer* celebrated as far as Brassing (never mind the smallness of the area; the writing was not worse than much that reaches the four corners of the earth).

Mr. Brooke was occasionally irritating, but Will's impatience was relieved by the division of his time between visits to

the Grange and retreats to his Middlemarch lodgings, which gave variety to his life.

"Shift the pegs a little," he said to himself, "and Mr. Brooke might be in the Cabinet, while I was under-secretary. That is the common order of things: the little waves make the large ones and are of the same pattern. I am better here than in the sort of life Mr. Casaubon would have trained me for, where the doing would be all laid down by a precedent too rigid for me to react upon. I don't care for prestige or high pay."

As Lydgate had said of him, he was a sort of gypsy, rather enjoying the sense of belonging to no class; he had a feeling of romance in his position and a pleasant consciousness of creating a little surprise wherever he went. That sort of enjoyment had been disturbed when he had felt some new distance between himself and Dorothea in their accidental meeting at Lydgate's, and his irritation had gone out towards Mr. Casaubon, who had declared beforehand that Will would lose caste. "I never had any caste," he would have said if that prophecy had been uttered to him, and the quick blood would have come and gone like breath in his transparent skin. But it is one thing to like defiance, and another thing to like its consequences.

Meanwhile, the town opinion about the new editor of the *Pioneer* was tending to confirm Mr. Casaubon's view. Will's relationship in that distinguished quarter did not, like Lydgate's high connexions, serve as an advantageous introduction; if it was rumoured that young Ladislaw was Mr. Casaubon's nephew or cousin, it was also rumoured that "Mr. Casaubon would have nothing to do with him."

"Brooke has taken him up," said Mr. Hawley, "because that is what no man in his senses could have expected. Casaubon has devilish good reasons, you may be sure, for turning the cold shoulder on a young fellow whose bringing up he paid for. Just like Brooke—one of those fellows who would praise a cat to sell a horse."

And some oddities of Will's, more or less poetical, appeared to support Mr. Keck, the editor of the *Trumpet*, in asserting that Ladislaw, if the truth were known, was not only a Polish emissary but crack-brained, which accounted for the preternatural quickness and glibness of his speech when he got on to a platform—as he did whenever he had an opportunity, speaking with a facility which cast reflections on solid Englishmen generally. It was disgusting to Keck to see a strip of a fellow, with light curls round his head, get up and speechify by the hour against institutions "which had existed when he was in his cradle." And in a leading article of the *Trumpet* Keck characterized Ladislaw's speech at a reform meeting as "the violence of an energumen—a miserable effort to shroud in the brilliancy of fireworks the daring of irresponsible statements and the poverty of a knowledge which was of the cheapest and most recent description."

"That was a rattling article yesterday, Keck," said Dr. Sprague with sarcastic intentions. "But what is an energumen?"

"Oh, a term that came up in the French Revolution," said Keck.

This dangerous aspect of Ladislaw was strangely contrasted with other habits which became matter of remark. He had a fondness, half artistic, half affectionate, for little children—the smaller they were on tolerably active legs, and the funnier their clothing, the better Will liked to surprise and please them. We know that in Rome he was given to ramble about among the poor people, and the taste did not quit him in Middlemarch.

He had somehow picked up a troop of droll children, little hatless boys with their galligaskins much worn and scant shirting to hang out, little girls who tossed their hair out of their eyes to look at him, and guardian brothers at the mature age of seven. This troop he had led out on gypsy excursions to Halsell Wood at nutting-time, and since the cold weather had set in he had taken them on a clear day to gather sticks for a bonfire in the hollow of a hillside, where he drew out a small feast of gingerbread for them and improvised a Punch-and-Judy drama with some private home-made puppets. Here was one oddity. Another was that in houses where he got friendly, he was given to stretch himself at full length on the rug while he talked and was apt to be discovered in this attitude by occasional callers for whom such an irregularity was likely to confirm the notions of his dangerously mixed blood and general laxity.

But Will's articles and speeches naturally recommended him in families which the new strictness of party division had marked off on the side of reform. He was invited to Mr. Bulstrode's; but here he could not lie down on the rug, and Mrs. Bulstrode felt that his mode of talking about Catholic countries, as if there were any truce with Antichrist, illustrated the usual tendency to unsoundness in intellectual men.

At Mr. Farebrother's, however, whom the irony of events had brought on the same side with Bulstrode in the national movement, Will became a favourite with the ladies; especially with little Miss Noble, whom it was one of his oddities to escort when he met her in the street with her little basket, giving her his arm in the eyes of the town and insisting on going with her to pay some call where she distributed her small filchings from her own share of sweet things.

But the house where he visited oftenest and lay most on the rug was Lydgate's. The two men were not at all alike, but they agreed none the worse. Lydgate was abrupt but not irritable, taking little notice of megrims in healthy people; and Ladislaw did not usually throw away his susceptibilities on those who took no notice of them. With Rosamond, on the other hand, he pouted and was wayward—nay, often uncomplimentary, much to her inward surprise; nevertheless he was gradually becoming necessary to her entertainment by his companionship in her music, his varied talk, and his freedom from the grave preoccupation which, with all her husband's tenderness and indulgence, often made his manners unsatisfactory to her and confirmed her dislike of the medical profession.

Lydgate, inclined to be sarcastic on the superstitious faith of the people in the efficacy of "the bill," while nobody cared about the low state of pathology, sometimes assailed Will with troublesome questions. One evening in March, Rosamond in her cherry-coloured dress with swansdown trimming about the throat sat at the tea-table; Lydgate, lately come in tired from his outdoor work, was seated sideways on an easy-chair by the fire with one leg over the elbow, his brow looking a little troubled as his eyes rambled over the columns of the *Pioneer*, while Rosamond, having noticed that he was perturbed, avoided looking at him and inwardly thanked heaven that she herself had not a moody disposition. Will Ladislaw was stretched on the rug contemplating the curtain-pole abstractedly and humming very low the notes of "When First I Saw Thy Face," while the house spaniel, also stretched out with small choice of room, looked from between his paws at the usurper of the rug with silent but strong objection.

Rosamond bringing Lydgate his cup of tea, he threw down the paper and said to Will, who had started up and gone to the table, "It's no use your puffing Brooke as a reforming landlord, Ladislaw; they only pick the more holes in his coat in

the *Trumpet*."

"No matter; those who read the *Pioneer* don't read the *Trumpet*," said Will, swallowing his tea and walking about. "Do you suppose the public reads with a view to its own conversion? We should have a witches' brewing with a vengeance then —'Mingle, mingle, mingle, mingle, you that mingle may'—and nobody would know which side he was going to take."

"Farebrother says he doesn't believe Brooke would get elected if the opportunity came: the very men who profess to be for him would bring another member out of the bag at the right moment."

"There's no harm in trying. It's good to have resident members."

"Why?" said Lydgate, who was much given to use that inconvenient word in a curt tone.

"They represent the local stupidity better," said Will, laughing and shaking his curls; "and they are kept on their best behaviour in the neighbourhood. Brooke is not a bad fellow, but he has done some good things on his estate that he never would have done but for this parliamentary bite."

"He's not fitted to be a public man," said Lydgate with contemptuous decision. "He would disappoint everybody who counted on him; I can see that at the hospital. Only, there Bulstrode holds the reins and drives him."

"That depends on how you fix your standard of public men," said Will. "He's good enough for the occasion; when the people have made up their mind as they are making it up now, they don't want a man—they only want a vote."

"That is the way with you political writers, Ladislaw—crying up a measure as if it were a universal cure, and crying up men who are a part of the very disease that wants curing."

"Why not? Men may help to cure themselves off the face of the land without knowing it," said Will, who could find reasons impromptu when he had not thought of a question beforehand.

"That is no excuse for encouraging the superstitious exaggeration of hopes about this particular measure, helping the cry to swallow it whole and to send up voting popinjays who are good for nothing but to carry it. You go against rottenness, and there is nothing more thoroughly rotten than making people believe that society can be cured by a political hocus-pocus."

"That's very fine, my dear fellow. But your cure must begin somewhere, and put it that a thousand things which debase a population can never be reformed without this particular reform to begin with. Look what Stanley said the other day—that the House had been tinkering long enough at small questions of bribery, inquiring whether this or that voter has had a guinea when everybody knows that the seats have been sold wholesale. Wait for wisdom and conscience in public agents—fiddlestick! The only conscience we can trust to is the massive sense of wrong in a class, and the best wisdom that will work is the wisdom of balancing claims. That's my text—which side is injured? I support the man who supports their claims, not the virtuous upholder of the wrong."

"That general talk about a particular case is mere question-begging, Ladislaw. When I say I go in for the dose that cures, it doesn't follow that I go in for opium in a given case of gout."

"I am not begging the question we are upon—whether we are to try for nothing till we find immaculate men to work with. Should you go on that plan? If there were one man who would carry you a medical reform and another who would oppose it, should you inquire which had the better motives or even the better brains?"

"Oh, of course," said Lydgate, seeing himself checkmated by a move which he had often used himself; "if one did not work with such men as are at hand, things must come to a dead-lock. Suppose the worst opinion in the town about Bulstrode were a true one, that would not make it less true that he has the sense and the resolution to do what I think ought to be done in the matters I know and care most about; but that is the only ground on which I go with him," Lydgate added rather proudly, bearing in mind Mr. Farebrother's remarks. "He is nothing to me otherwise; I would not cry him up on any personal ground—I would keep clear of that."

"Do you mean that I cry up Brooke on any personal ground?" said Will Ladislaw, nettled and turning sharp round. For the first time he felt offended with Lydgate, not the less so, perhaps, because he would have declined any close inquiry into the growth of his relation to Mr. Brooke.

"Not at all," said Lydgate; "I was simply explaining my own action. I meant that a man may work for a special end with others whose motives and general course are equivocal if he is quite sure of his personal independence and that he is not working for his private interest—either place or money."

"Then, why don't you extend your liberality to others?" said Will, still nettled. "My personal independence is as important to me as yours is to you. You have no more reason to imagine that I have personal expectations from Brooke than I have to imagine that you have personal expectations from Bulstrode. Motives are points of honour, I suppose—nobody can prove them. But as to money and place in the world," Will ended, tossing back his head, "I think it is pretty clear that I am not determined by considerations of that sort."

"You quite mistake me, Ladislaw," said Lydgate, surprised. He had been preoccupied with his own vindication and had been blind to what Ladislaw might infer on his own account. "I beg your pardon for unintentionally annoying you. In fact, I should rather attribute to you a romantic disregard of your own worldly interests. On the political question, I referred simply to intellectual bias."

"How very unpleasant you both are this evening!" said Rosamond. "I cannot conceive why money should have been referred to. Politics and medicine are sufficiently disagreeable to quarrel upon. You can both of you go on quarrelling with all the world and with each other on those two topics."

Rosamond looked mildly neutral as she said this, rising to ring the bell and then crossing to her work-table.

"Poor Rosy!" said Lydgate, putting out his hand to her as she was passing him. "Disputation is not amusing to cherubs. Have some music. Ask Ladislaw to sing with you."

When Will was gone Rosamond said to her husband, "What put you out of temper this evening, Tertius?"

"Me? It was Ladislaw who was out of temper. He is like a bit of tinder."

"But I mean before that. Something had vexed you before you came in; you looked cross. And that made you begin to dispute with Mr. Ladislaw. You hurt me very much when you look so, Tertius."

"Do I? Then I am a brute," said Lydgate, caressing her penitently.

“What vexed you?”

“Oh, outdoor things—business.”

It was really a letter insisting on the payment of a bill for furniture. But Rosamond was expecting to have a baby, and Lydgate wished to save her from any perturbation.

CHAPTER 47

Was never true love loved in vain,
For truest love is highest gain.
No art can make it: it must spring
Where elements are fostering.
So in heaven's spot and hour
Springs the little native flower,
Downward root and upward eye,
Shapen by the earth and sky.

It happened to be on a Saturday evening that Will Ladislaw had that little discussion with Lydgate. Its effect when he went to his own rooms was to make him sit up half the night thinking over again, under a new irritation, all that he had before thought of his having settled in Middlemarch and harnessed himself with Mr. Brooke. Hesitations before he had taken the step had since turned into susceptibility to every hint that he would have been wiser not to take it; and hence came his heat towards Lydgate—a heat which still kept him restless. Was he not making a fool of himself—and at a time when he was more than ever conscious of being something better than a fool? And for what end?

Well, for no definite end. True, he had dreamy visions of possibilities: there is no human being who having both passions and thoughts does not think in consequence of his passions, does not find images rising in his mind which soothe the passion with hope or sting it with dread. But this, which happens to us all, happens to some with a wide difference; and Will was not one of those whose wit "keeps the roadway": he had his bypaths where there were little joys of his own choosing, such as gentlemen cantering on the highroad might have thought rather idiotic. The way in which he made a sort of happiness for himself out of his feeling for Dorothea was an example of this. It may seem strange, but it is the fact that the ordinary vulgar vision of which Mr. Casaubon suspected him—namely that Dorothea might become a widow and that the interest he had established in her mind might turn into acceptance of him as a husband—had no tempting, arresting power over him; he did not live in the scenery of such an event and follow it out as we all do with that imagined "otherwise" which is our practical heaven. It was not only that he was unwilling to entertain thoughts which could be accused of baseness and was already uneasy in the sense that he had to justify himself from the charge of ingratitude—the latent consciousness of many other barriers between himself and Dorothea besides the existence of her husband had helped to turn away his imagination from speculating on what might befall Mr. Casaubon. And there were yet other reasons. Will, we know, could not bear the thought of any flaw appearing in his crystal; he was at once exasperated and delighted by the calm freedom with which Dorothea looked at him and spoke to him, and there was something so exquisite in thinking of her just as she was that he could not long for a change which must somehow change her. Do we not shun the street version of a fine melody, or shrink from the news that the rarity—some bit of chiselling or engraving perhaps—which we have dwelt on even with exultation in the trouble it has cost us to snatch glimpses of it is really not an uncommon thing, and may be obtained as an everyday possession? Our good depends on the quality and breadth of our emotion; and to Will, a creature who cared little for what was called the solid things of life and greatly for its subtler influences, to have within him such a feeling as he had towards Dorothea, was like the inheritance of a fortune. What others might have called the futility of his passion made an additional delight for his imagination: he was conscious of a generous movement and of verifying in his own experience that higher love-poetry which had charmed his fancy. Dorothea, he said to himself, was forever enthroned in his soul; no other woman could sit higher than her footstool, and if he could have written out in immortal syllables the effect she wrought within him, he might have boasted after the example of old Drayton that

Queens hereafter might be glad to live
Upon the alms of her superfluous praise.

But this result was questionable. And what else could he do for Dorothea? What was his devotion worth to her? It was impossible to tell. He would not go out of her reach. He saw no creature among her friends to whom he could believe that she spoke with the same simple confidence as to him. She had once said that she would like him to stay, and stay he would, whatever fire-breathing dragons might hiss around her.

This had always been the conclusion of Will's hesitations. But he was not without contradictoriness and rebellion even towards his own resolve. He had often got irritated, as he was on this particular night, by some outside demonstration that his public exertions with Mr. Brooke as a chief could not seem as heroic as he would like them to be, and this was always associated with the other ground of irritation—that notwithstanding his sacrifice of dignity for Dorothea's sake, he could hardly ever see her. Whereupon, not being able to contradict these unpleasant facts, he contradicted his own strongest bias and said, "I am a fool."

Nevertheless, since the inward debate necessarily turned on Dorothea, he ended, as he had done before, only by getting a livelier sense of what her presence would be to him; and suddenly reflecting that the morrow would be Sunday, he determined to go to Lowick Church and see her. He slept upon that idea, but when he was dressing in the rational morning light, Objection said, "That will be a virtual defiance of Mr. Casaubon's prohibition to visit Lowick, and Dorothea will be

displeased."

"Nonsense!" argued Inclination. "It would be too monstrous for him to hinder me from going out to a pretty country church on a spring morning. And Dorothea will be glad."

"It will be clear to Mr. Casaubon that you have come either to annoy him or to see Dorothea."

"It is not true that I go to annoy him, and why should I not go to see Dorothea? Is he to have everything to himself and be always comfortable? Let him smart a little, as other people are obliged to do. I have always liked the quaintness of the church and congregation; besides, I know the Tuckers: I shall go into their pew."

Having silenced Objection by force of unreason, Will walked to Lowick as if he had been on the way to Paradise, crossing Halsell Common and skirting the wood, where the sunlight fell broadly under the budding boughs, bringing out the beauties of moss and lichen, and fresh green growths piercing the brown. Everything seemed to know that it was Sunday and to approve of his going to Lowick Church. Will easily felt happy when nothing crossed his humour, and by this time the thought of vexing Mr. Casaubon had become rather amusing to him, making his face break into its merry smile, pleasant to see as the breaking of sunshine on the water—though the occasion was not exemplary. But most of us are apt to settle within ourselves that the man who blocks our way is odious, and not to mind causing him a little of the disgust which his personality excites in ourselves. Will went along with a small book under his arm and a hand in each side pocket, never reading, but chanting a little, as he made scenes of what would happen in church and coming out. He was experimenting in tunes to suit some words of his own, sometimes trying a ready-made melody, sometimes improvising. The words were not exactly a hymn, but they certainly fitted his Sunday experience:

O me, O me, what frugal cheer
    My love doth feed upon!
A touch, a ray, that is not here,
    A shadow that is gone:

A dream of breath that might be near,
    An inly echoed tone,
The thought that one may think me dear,
    The place where one was known,

The tremor of a banished fear,
    An ill that was not done—
O me, O me, what frugal cheer
    My love doth feed upon!

Sometimes, when he took off his hat, shaking his head backward and showing his delicate throat as he sang, he looked like an incarnation of the spring whose spirit filled the air—a bright creature, abundant in uncertain promises.

The bells were still ringing when he got to Lowick, and he went into the curate's pew before any one else arrived there. But he was still left alone in it when the congregation had assembled. The curate's pew was opposite the rector's at the entrance of the small chancel, and Will had time to fear that Dorothea might not come while he looked round at the group of rural faces which made the congregation from year to year within the white-washed walls and dark old pews, hardly with more change than we see in the boughs of a tree which breaks here and there with age but yet has young shoots. Mr. Rigg's frog-face was something alien and unaccountable, but notwithstanding this shock to the order of things, there were still the Waules and the rural stock of the Powderells in their pews side by side; brother Samuel's cheek had the same purple round as ever, and the three generations of decent cottagers came as of old with a sense of duty to their betters generally—the smaller children regarding Mr. Casaubon, who wore the black gown and mounted to the highest box, as probably the chief of all betters and the one most awful if offended. Even in 1831 Lowick was at peace, not more agitated by reform than by the solemn tenor of the Sunday sermon. The congregation had been used to seeing Will at church in former days, and no one took much note of him except the quire, who expected him to make a figure in the singing.

Dorothea did at last appear on this quaint background, walking up the short aisle in her white beaver bonnet and grey cloak—the same she had worn in the Vatican. Her face being, from her entrance, towards the chancel, even her short-sighted eyes soon discerned Will, but there was no outward show of her feeling except a slight paleness and a grave bow as she passed him. To his own surprise Will felt suddenly uncomfortable and dared not look at her after they had bowed to each other. Two minutes later, when Mr. Casaubon came out of the vestry, and entering the pew, seated himself in face of Dorothea, Will felt his paralysis more complete. He could look nowhere except at the quire in the little gallery over the vestry-door; Dorothea was perhaps pained, and he had made a wretched blunder. It was no longer amusing to vex Mr. Casaubon, who had the advantage probably of watching him and seeing that he dared not turn his head. Why had he not imagined this beforehand? But he could not expect that he should sit in that square pew alone, unrelieved by any Tuckers, who had apparently departed from Lowick altogether, for a new clergyman was in the desk. Still he called himself stupid now for not foreseeing that it would be impossible for him to look towards Dorothea—nay, that she might feel his coming an impertinence. There was no delivering himself from his cage, however, and Will found his places and looked at his book as if he had been a schoolmistress, feeling that the morning service had never been so immeasurably long before, that he was utterly ridiculous, out of temper, and miserable. This was what a man got by worshipping the sight of a woman! The clerk observed with surprise that Mr. Ladislaw did not join in the tune of Hanover, and reflected that he might have a cold.

Mr. Casaubon did not preach that morning, and there was no change in Will's situation until the blessing had been pronounced and everyone rose. It was the fashion at Lowick for "the betters" to go out first. With a sudden determination to break the spell that was upon him, Will looked straight at Mr. Casaubon. But that gentleman's eyes were on the button of the pew-door, which he opened, allowing Dorothea to pass and following her immediately without raising his eyelids. Will's glance had caught Dorothea's as she turned out of the pew, and again she bowed, but this time with a look of agitation, as if she were repressing tears. Will walked out after them, but they went on towards the little gate leading out of

the churchyard into the shrubbery, never looking round.

It was impossible for him to follow them, and he could only walk back sadly at mid-day along the same road which he had trodden hopefully in the morning. The lights were all changed for him both without and within.

CHAPTER 48

Surely the golden hours are turning grey
And dance no more, and vainly strive to run:
I see their white locks streaming in the wind—
Each face is haggard as it looks at me,
Slow turning in the constant clasping round
Storm-driven.

Dorothea's distress when she was leaving the church came chiefly from the perception that Mr. Casaubon was determined not to speak to his cousin and that Will's presence at church had served to mark more strongly the alienation between them. Will's coming seemed to her quite excusable, nay, she thought it an amiable movement in him towards a reconciliation which she herself had been constantly wishing for. He had probably imagined, as she had, that if Mr. Casaubon and he could meet easily, they would shake hands and friendly intercourse might return. But now Dorothea felt quite robbed of that hope. Will was banished further than ever, for Mr. Casaubon must have been newly embittered by this thrusting upon him of a presence which he refused to recognize.

He had not been very well that morning, suffering from some difficulty in breathing, and had not preached in consequence; she was not surprised, therefore, that he was nearly silent at luncheon, still less that he made no allusion to Will Ladislaw. For her own part she felt that she could never again introduce that subject. They usually spent apart the hours between luncheon and dinner on a Sunday, Mr. Casaubon in the library dozing chiefly, and Dorothea in her boudoir, where she was wont to occupy herself with some of her favourite books. There was a little heap of them on the table in the bow-window—of various sorts, from Herodotus, which she was learning to read with Mr. Casaubon, to her old companion Pascal and Keble's *Christian Year*. But today she opened one after another and could read none of them. Everything seemed dreary: the portents before the birth of Cyrus—Jewish antiquities—oh dear!—devout epigrams—the sacred chime of favourite hymns—all alike were as flat as tunes beaten on wood; even the spring flowers and the grass had a dull shiver in them under the afternoon clouds that hid the sun fitfully; even the sustaining thoughts which had become habits seemed to have in them the weariness of long future days in which she would still live with them for her sole companions. It was another or rather a fuller sort of companionship that poor Dorothea was hungering for, and the hunger had grown from the perpetual effort demanded by her married life. She was always trying to be what her husband wished and never able to repose on his delight in what she was. The thing that she liked, that she spontaneously cared to have, seemed to be always excluded from her life, for if it was only granted and not shared by her husband, it might as well have been denied. About Will Ladislaw there had been a difference between them from the first, and it had ended, since Mr. Casaubon had so severely repulsed Dorothea's strong feeling about his claims on the family property, by her being convinced that she was in the right and her husband in the wrong, but that she was helpless. This afternoon the helplessness was more wretchedly benumbing than ever; she longed for objects who could be dear to her and to whom she could be dear. She longed for work which would be directly beneficent like the sunshine and the rain, and now it appeared that she was to live more and more in a virtual tomb, where there was the apparatus of a ghastly labour producing what would never see the light. Today she had stood at the door of the tomb and seen Will Ladislaw receding into the distant world of warm activity and fellowship—turning his face towards her as he went.

Books were of no use. Thinking was of no use. It was Sunday, and she could not have the carriage to go to Celia, who had lately had a baby. There was no refuge now from spiritual emptiness and discontent, and Dorothea had to bear her bad mood as she would have borne a headache.

After dinner, at the hour when she usually began to read aloud, Mr. Casaubon proposed that they should go into the library, where, he said, he had ordered a fire and lights. He seemed to have revived and to be thinking intently.

In the library Dorothea observed that he had newly arranged a row of his notebooks on a table, and now he took up and put into her hand a well-known volume, which was a table of contents to all the others.

"You will oblige me, my dear," he said, seating himself, "if instead of other reading this evening you will go through this aloud, pencil in hand, and at each point where I say 'mark,' will make a cross with your pencil. This is the first step in a sifting process which I have long had in view, and as we go on I shall be able to indicate to you certain principles of selection whereby you will, I trust, have an intelligent participation in my purpose."

This proposal was only one more sign added to many since his memorable interview with Lydgate that Mr. Casaubon's original reluctance to let Dorothea work with him had given place to the contrary disposition, namely, to demand much interest and labour from her.

After she had read and marked for two hours, he said, "We will take the volume upstairs—and the pencil, if you please—and in case of reading in the night, we can pursue this task. It is not wearisome to you, I trust, Dorothea?"

"I prefer always reading what you like best to hear," said Dorothea, who told the simple truth; for what she dreaded was to exert herself in reading or anything else which left him as joyless as ever.

It was a proof of the force with which certain characteristics in Dorothea impressed those around her that her husband, with all his jealousy and suspicion, had gathered implicit trust in the integrity of her promises and her power of devoting

herself to her idea of the right and best. Of late he had begun to feel that these qualities were a peculiar possession for himself, and he wanted to engross them.

The reading in the night did come. Dorothea in her young weariness had slept soon and fast; she was awakened by a sense of light, which seemed to her at first like a sudden vision of sunset after she had climbed a steep hill; she opened her eyes and saw her husband wrapped in his warm gown seating himself in the arm-chair near the fireplace, where the embers were still glowing. He had lit two candles, expecting that Dorothea would awake, but not liking to rouse her by more direct means.

"Are you ill, Edward?" she said, rising immediately.

"I felt some uneasiness in a reclining posture. I will sit here for a time." She threw wood on the fire, wrapped herself up, and said, "You would like me to read to you?"

"You would oblige me greatly by doing so, Dorothea," said Mr. Casaubon with a shade more meekness than usual in his polite manner. "I am wakeful; my mind is remarkably lucid."

"I fear that the excitement may be too great for you," said Dorothea, remembering Lydgate's cautions.

"No, I am not conscious of undue excitement. Thought is easy." Dorothea dared not insist, and she read for an hour or more on the same plan as she had done in the evening, but getting over the pages with more quickness. Mr. Casaubon's mind was more alert, and he seemed to anticipate what was coming after a very slight verbal indication, saying, "That will do—mark that," or "Pass on to the next head—I omit the second excursus on Crete." Dorothea was amazed to think of the birdlike speed with which his mind was surveying the ground where it had been creeping for years.

At last he said, "Close the book now, my dear. We will resume our work tomorrow. I have deferred it too long and would gladly see it completed. But you observe that the principle on which my selection is made is to give adequate, and not disproportionate, illustration to each of the theses enumerated in my introduction, as at present sketched. You have perceived that distinctly, Dorothea?"

"Yes," said Dorothea rather tremulously. She felt sick at heart.

"And now I think that I can take some repose," said Mr. Casaubon. He lay down again and begged her to put out the lights. When she had lain down too and there was a darkness only broken by a dull glow on the hearth, he said, "Before I sleep, I have a request to make, Dorothea."

"What is it?" said Dorothea with dread in her mind.

"It is that you will let me know, deliberately, whether, in case of my death, you will carry out my wishes, whether you will avoid doing what I should deprecate and apply yourself to do what I should desire."

Dorothea was not taken by surprise: many incidents had been leading her to the conjecture of some intention on her husband's part which might make a new yoke for her. She did not answer immediately.

"You refuse?" said Mr. Casaubon with more edge in his tone.

"No, I do not yet refuse," said Dorothea in a clear voice, the need of freedom asserting itself within her; "but it is too solemn—I think it is not right—to make a promise when I am ignorant what it will bind me to. Whatever affection prompted I would do without promising."

"But you would use your own judgement; I ask you to obey mine; you refuse."

"No, dear, no!" said Dorothea beseechingly, crushed by opposing fears. "But may I wait and reflect a little while? I desire with my whole soul to do what will comfort you, but I cannot give any pledge suddenly—still less a pledge to do I know not what."

"You cannot then confide in the nature of my wishes?"

"Grant me till tomorrow," said Dorothea beseechingly.

"Till tomorrow then," said Mr. Casaubon.

Soon she could hear that he was sleeping, but there was no more sleep for her. While she constrained herself to lie still lest she should disturb him, her mind was carrying on a conflict in which imagination ranged its forces first on one side and then on the other. She had no presentiment that the power which her husband wished to establish over her future action had relation to anything else than his work. But it was clear enough to her that he would expect her to devote herself to sifting those mixed heaps of material which were to be the doubtful illustration of principles still more doubtful. The poor child had become altogether unbelieving as to the trustworthiness of that key which had made the ambition and the labour of her husband's life. It was not wonderful that, in spite of her small instruction, her judgement in this matter was truer than his, for she looked with unbiassed comparison and healthy sense at probabilities on which he had risked all his egoism. And now she pictured to herself the days, and months, and years which she must spend in sorting what might be called shattered mummies and fragments of a tradition which was itself a mosaic wrought from crushed ruins—sorting them as food for a theory which was already withered in the birth like an elfin child. Doubtless a vigorous error vigorously pursued has kept the embryos of truth a-breathing: the quest of gold being at the same time a questioning of substances, the body of chemistry is prepared for its soul, and Lavoisier is born. But Mr. Casaubon's theory of the elements which made the seed of all tradition was not likely to bruise itself unawares against discoveries; it floated among flexible conjectures no more solid than those etymologies which seemed strong because of likeness in sound, until it was shown that likeness in sound made them impossible; it was a method of interpretation which was not tested by the necessity of forming anything which had sharper collisions than an elaborate notion of Gog and Magog; it was as free from interruption as a plan for threading the stars together. And Dorothea had so often had to check her weariness and impatience over this questionable riddle-guessing, as it revealed itself to her instead of the fellowship in high knowledge which was to make life worthier! She could understand well enough now why her husband had come to cling to her as possibly the only hope left that his labours would ever take a shape in which they could be given to the world. At first it had seemed that he wished to keep even her aloof from any close knowledge of what he was doing, but gradually the terrible stringency of human need—the prospect of a too speedy death—

And here Dorothea's pity turned from her own future to her husband's past—nay, to his present hard struggle with a lot which had grown out of that past: the lonely labour, the ambition breathing hardly under the pressure of self-distrust; the

goal receding, and the heavier limbs; and now at last the sword visibly trembling above him! And had she not wished to marry him that she might help him in his life's labour? But she had thought the work was to be something greater, which she could serve in devoutly for its own sake. Was it right, even to soothe his grief—would it be possible, even if she promised—to work as in a treadmill, fruitlessly?

And yet, could she deny him? Could she say, "I refuse to content this pining hunger"? It would be refusing to do for him dead what she was almost sure to do for him living. If he lived as Lydgate had said he might, for fifteen years or more, her life would certainly be spent in helping him and obeying him.

Still, there was a deep difference between that devotion to the living and that indefinite promise of devotion to the dead. While he lived, he could claim nothing that she would not still be free to remonstrate against, and even to refuse. But—the thought passed through her mind more than once, though she could not believe in it—might he not mean to demand something more from her than she had been able to imagine, since he wanted her pledge to carry out his wishes without telling her exactly what they were? No; his heart was bound up in his work only: that was the end for which his failing life was to be eked out by hers.

And now, if she were to say, "No! If you die, I will put no finger to your work"—it seemed as if she would be crushing that bruised heart.

For four hours Dorothea lay in this conflict, till she felt ill and bewildered, unable to resolve, praying mutely. Helpless as a child which has sobbed and sought too long, she fell into a late morning sleep, and when she waked Mr. Casaubon was already up. Tantripp told her that he had read prayers, breakfasted, and was in the library.

"I never saw you look so pale, Madam," said Tantripp, a solid-figured woman who had been with the sisters at Lausanne.

"Was I ever high-coloured, Tantripp?" said Dorothea, smiling faintly.

"Well, not to say high-coloured, but with a bloom like a Chiny rose. But always smelling those leather books, what can be expected? Do rest a little this morning, Madam. Let me say you are ill and not able to go into that close library."

"Oh no, no! Let me make haste," said Dorothea. "Mr. Casaubon wants me particularly."

When she went down she felt sure that she should promise to fulfil his wishes, but that would be later in the day—not yet.

As Dorothea entered the library, Mr. Casaubon turned round from the table where he had been placing some books and said, "I was waiting for your appearance, my dear. I had hoped to set to work at once this morning, but I find myself under some indisposition, probably from too much excitement yesterday. I am going now to take a turn in the shrubbery, since the air is milder."

"I am glad to hear that," said Dorothea. "Your mind, I feared, was too active last night."

"I would fain have it set at rest on the point I last spoke of, Dorothea. You can now, I hope, give me an answer."

"May I come out to you in the garden presently?" said Dorothea, winning a little breathing space in that way.

"I shall be in the yew-tree walk for the next half-hour," said Mr. Casaubon, and then he left her.

Dorothea, feeling very weary, rang and asked Tantripp to bring her some wraps. She had been sitting still for a few minutes, but not in any renewal of the former conflict; she simply felt that she was going to say "Yes" to her own doom: she was too weak, too full of dread at the thought of inflicting a keen-edged blow on her husband to do anything but submit completely. She sat still and let Tantripp put on her bonnet and shawl, a passivity which was unusual with her, for she liked to wait on herself.

"God bless you, Madam!" said Tantripp with an irrepressible movement of love towards the beautiful, gentle creature for whom she felt unable to do anything more, now that she had finished tying the bonnet.

This was too much for Dorothea's highly-strung feeling, and she burst into tears, sobbing against Tantripp's arm. But soon she checked herself, dried her eyes, and went out at the glass door into the shrubbery.

"I wish every book in that library was built into a caticom for your master," said Tantripp to Pratt, the butler, finding him in the breakfast-room. She had been at Rome and visited the antiquities, as we know; and she always declined to call Mr. Casaubon anything but "your master," when speaking to the other servants.

Pratt laughed. He liked his master very well, but he liked Tantripp better.

When Dorothea was out on the gravel walks, she lingered among the nearer clumps of trees, hesitating as she had done once before, though from a different cause. Then she had feared lest her effort at fellowship should be unwelcome; now she dreaded going to the spot where she foresaw that she must bind herself to a fellowship from which she shrank. Neither law nor the world's opinion compelled her to this—only her husband's nature and her own compassion, only the ideal and not the real yoke of marriage. She saw clearly enough the whole situation, yet she was fettered: she could not smite the stricken soul that entreated hers. If that were weakness, Dorothea was weak. But the half-hour was passing, and she must not delay longer. When she entered the yew-tree walk she could not see her husband; but the walk had bends, and she went, expecting to catch sight of his figure wrapped in a blue cloak, which, with a warm velvet cap, was his outer garment on chill days for the garden. It occurred to her that he might be resting in the summer-house, towards which the path diverged a little. Turning the angle, she could see him seated on the bench, close to a stone table. His arms were resting on the table, and his brow was bowed down on them, the blue cloak being dragged forward and screening his face on each side.

"He exhausted himself last night," Dorothea said to herself, thinking at first that he was asleep and that the summer-house was too damp a place to rest in. But then she remembered that of late she had seen him take that attitude when she was reading to him, as if he found it easier than any other, and that he would sometimes speak, as well as listen, with his face down in that way. She went into the summer-house and said, "I am come, Edward; I am ready."

He took no notice, and she thought that he must be fast asleep. She laid her hand on his shoulder and repeated, "I am ready!" Still he was motionless; and with a sudden confused fear she leaned down to him, took off his velvet cap, and leaned her cheek close to his head, crying in a distressed tone.

"Wake, dear, wake! Listen to me. I am come to answer."

But Dorothea never gave her answer.

Later in the day, Lydgate was seated by her bedside, and she was talking deliriously, thinking aloud, and recalling what had gone through her mind the night before. She knew him and called him by his name but appeared to think it right that she should explain everything to him, and again and again begged him to explain everything to her husband.

“Tell him I shall go to him soon; I am ready to promise. Only, thinking about it was so dreadful—it has made me ill. Not very ill. I shall soon be better. Go and tell him.”

But the silence in her husband’s ear was never more to be broken.

CHAPTER 49

A task too strong for wizard spells
This squire had brought about;
'Tis easy dropping stones in wells,
But who shall get them out?

I wish to God we could hinder Dorothea from knowing this," said Sir James Chettam with the little frown on his brow and an expression of intense disgust about his mouth.

He was standing on the hearth-rug in the library at Lowick Grange and speaking to Mr. Brooke. It was the day after Mr. Casaubon had been buried, and Dorothea was not yet able to leave her room.

"That would be difficult, you know, Chettam, as she is an executrix, and she likes to go into these things—property, land, that kind of thing. She has her notions, you know," said Mr. Brooke, sticking his eyeglasses on nervously and exploring the edges of a folded paper which he held in his hand; "and she would like to act—depend upon it; as an executrix Dorothea would want to act. And she was twenty-one last December, you know. I can hinder nothing."

Sir James looked at the carpet for a minute in silence, and then lifting his eyes suddenly, fixed them on Mr. Brooke, saying, "I will tell you what we can do. Until Dorothea is well, all business must be kept from her, and as soon as she is able to be moved she must come to us. Being with Celia and the baby will be the best thing in the world for her and will pass away the time. And meanwhile you must get rid of Ladislaw; you must send him out of the country." Here Sir James's look of disgust returned in all its intensity.

Mr. Brooke put his hands behind him, walked to the window, and straightened his back with a little shake before he replied, "That is easily said, Chettam, easily said, you know."

"My dear sir," persisted Sir James, restraining his indignation within respectful forms, "it was you who brought him here, and you who keep him here—I mean by the occupation you give him."

"Yes, but I can't dismiss him in an instant without assigning reasons, my dear Chettam. Ladislaw has been invaluable, most satisfactory. I consider that I have done this part of the country a service by bringing him—by bringing him, you know." Mr. Brooke ended with a nod, turning round to give it.

"It's a pity this part of the country didn't do without him, that's all I have to say about it. At any rate, as Dorothea's brother-in-law, I feel warranted in objecting strongly to his being kept here by any action on the part of her friends. You admit, I hope, that I have a right to speak about what concerns the dignity of my wife's sister?"

Sir James was getting warm.

"Of course, my dear Chettam, of course. But you and I have different ideas—different—"

"Not about this action of Casaubon's, I should hope," interrupted Sir James. "I say that he has most unfairly compromised Dorothea. I say that there never was a meaner, more ungentlemanly action than this—a codicil of this sort to a will which he made at the time of his marriage with the knowledge and reliance of her family—a positive insult to Dorothea!"

"Well, you know, Casaubon was a little twisted about Ladislaw. Ladislaw has told me the reason—dislike of the bent he took, you know; Ladislaw didn't think much of Casaubon's notions, Thoth and Dagon—that sort of thing; and I fancy that Casaubon didn't like the independent position Ladislaw had taken up. I saw the letters between them, you know. Poor Casaubon was a little buried in books—he didn't know the world."

"It's all very well for Ladislaw to put that colour on it," said Sir James. "But I believe Casaubon was only jealous of him on Dorothea's account, and the world will suppose that she gave him some reason; and that is what makes it so abominable—coupling her name with this young fellow's."

"My dear Chettam, it won't lead to anything, you know," said Mr. Brooke, seating himself and sticking on his eyeglass again. "It's all of a piece with Casaubon's oddity. This paper, now, 'Synoptical Tabulation' and so on, 'for the use of Mrs. Casaubon,' it was locked up in the desk with the will. I suppose he meant Dorothea to publish his researches, eh? And she'll do it, you know; she has gone into his studies uncommonly."

"My dear sir," said Sir James impatiently, "that is neither here nor there. The question is whether you don't see with me the propriety of sending young Ladislaw away."

"Well, no, not the urgency of the thing. By and by, perhaps, it may come round. As to gossip, you know, sending him away won't hinder gossip. People say what they like to say, not what they have chapter and verse for," said Mr. Brooke, becoming acute about the truths that lay on the side of his own wishes. "I might get rid of Ladislaw up to a certain point—take away the *Pioneer* from him, and that sort of thing; but I couldn't send him out of the country if he didn't choose to go—didn't choose, you know."

Mr. Brooke, persisting as quietly as if he were only discussing the nature of last year's weather, and nodding at the end with his usual amenity, was an exasperating form of obstinacy.

"Good God!" said Sir James with as much passion as he ever showed. "Let us get him a post; let us spend money on him. If he could go in the suite of some colonial governor! Grampus might take him—and I could write to Fulke about it."

“But Ladislaw won’t be shipped off like a head of cattle, my dear fellow; Ladislaw has his ideas. It’s my opinion that if he were to part from me tomorrow you’d only hear the more of him in the country. With his talent for speaking and drawing up documents, there are few men who could come up to him as an agitator—an agitator, you know.”

“Agitator!” said Sir James with bitter emphasis, feeling that the syllables of this word properly repeated were a sufficient exposure of its hatefulness.

“But be reasonable, Chettam. Dorothea, now. As you say, she had better go to Celia as soon as possible. She can stay under your roof, and in the meantime, things may come round quietly. Don’t let us be firing off our guns in a hurry, you know. Standish will keep our counsel, and the news will be old before it’s known. Twenty things may happen to carry off Ladislaw—without my doing anything, you know.”

“Then I am to conclude that you decline to do anything?”

“Decline, Chettam? No, I didn’t say decline. But I really don’t see what I could do. Ladislaw is a gentleman.”

“I am glad to hear it!” said Sir James, his irritation making him forget himself a little. “I am sure Casaubon was not.”

“Well, it would have been worse if he had made the codicil to hinder her from marrying again at all, you know.”

“I don’t know that,” said Sir James. “It would have been less indelicate.”

“One of poor Casaubon’s freaks! That attack upset his brain a little. It all goes for nothing. She doesn’t *want* to marry Ladislaw.”

“But this codicil is framed so as to make everybody believe that she did. I don’t believe anything of the sort about Dorothea,” said Sir James—then frowningly, “but I suspect Ladislaw. I tell you frankly, I suspect Ladislaw.”

“I couldn’t take any immediate action on that ground, Chettam. In fact, if it were possible to pack him off—send him to Norfolk Island—that sort of thing—it would look all the worse for Dorothea to those who knew about it. It would seem as if we distrusted her—distrusted her, you know.”

That Mr. Brooke had hit on an undeniable argument did not tend to soothe Sir James. He put out his hand to reach his hat, implying that he did not mean to contend further, and said, still with some heat, “Well, I can only say that I think Dorothea was sacrificed once because her friends were too careless. I shall do what I can, as her brother, to protect her now.”

“You can’t do better than get her to Freshitt as soon as possible, Chettam. I approve that plan altogether,” said Mr. Brooke, well pleased that he had won the argument. It would have been highly inconvenient to him to part with Ladislaw at that time, when a dissolution might happen any day, and electors were to be convinced of the course by which the interests of the country would be best served. Mr. Brooke sincerely believed that this end could be secured by his own return to Parliament; he offered the forces of his mind honestly to the nation.

CHAPTER 50

"This Loller here wol prechen us somewhat."
"Nay by my father's soule! that schal he nat,"
Sayde the Schipman, "here schal he not preche,
He schal no gospel glosen here ne teche.
We leven all in the gret God," quod he.
He wolden sowen some diffcultee.

—*Canterbury Tales*

Dorothea had been safe at Freshitt Hall nearly a week before she had asked any dangerous questions. Every morning now she sat with Celia in the prettiest of upstairs sitting-rooms, opening into a small conservatory—Celia all in white and lavender like a bunch of mixed violets, watching the remarkable acts of the baby, which were so dubious to her inexperienced mind that all conversation was interrupted by appeals for their interpretation made to the oracular nurse. Dorothea sat by in her widow's dress, with an expression which rather provoked Celia as being much too sad; for not only was baby quite well, but really when a husband had been so dull and troublesome while he lived, and besides that had—well, well! Sir James, of course, had told Celia everything, with a strong representation how important it was that Dorothea should not know it sooner than was inevitable.

But Mr. Brooke had been right in predicting that Dorothea would not long remain passive where action had been assigned to her; she knew the purport of her husband's will made at the time of their marriage, and her mind, as soon as she was clearly conscious of her position, was silently occupied with what she ought to do as the owner of Lowick Manor with the patronage of the living attached to it.

One morning when her uncle paid his usual visit, though with an unusual alacrity in his manner which he accounted for by saying that it was now pretty certain Parliament would be dissolved forthwith, Dorothea said, "Uncle, it is right now that I should consider who is to have the living at Lowick. After Mr. Tucker had been provided for, I never heard my husband say that he had any clergyman in his mind as a successor to himself. I think I ought to have the keys now and go to Lowick to examine all my husband's papers. There may be something that would throw light on his wishes."

"No hurry, my dear," said Mr. Brooke quietly. "By and by, you know, you can go, if you like. But I cast my eyes over things in the desks and drawers—there was nothing—nothing but deep subjects, you know—besides the will. Everything can be done by and by. As to the living, I have had an application for interest already—I should say rather good. Mr. Tyke has been strongly recommended to me—I had something to do with getting him an appointment before. An apostolic man, I believe—the sort of thing that would suit you, my dear."

"I should like to have fuller knowledge about him, Uncle, and judge for myself if Mr. Casaubon has not left any expression of his wishes. He has perhaps made some addition to his will—there may be some instructions for me," said Dorothea, who had all the while had this conjecture in her mind with relation to her husband's work.

"Nothing about the rectory, my dear—nothing," said Mr. Brooke, rising to go away and putting out his hand to his nieces; "nor about his researches, you know. Nothing in the will."

Dorothea's lip quivered.

"Come, you must not think of these things yet, my dear. By and by, you know."

"I am quite well now, Uncle; I wish to exert myself."

"Well, well, we shall see. But I must run away now—I have no end of work now—it's a crisis—a political crisis, you know. And here is Celia and her little man—you are an aunt, you know, now, and I am a sort of grandfather," said Mr. Brooke with placid hurry, anxious to get away and tell Chettam that it would not be his (Mr. Brooke's) fault if Dorothea insisted on looking into everything.

Dorothea sank back in her chair when her uncle had left the room and cast her eyes down meditatively on her crossed hands.

"Look, Dodo! Look at him! Did you ever see anything like that?" said Celia in her comfortable staccato.

"What, Kitty?" said Dorothea, lifting her eyes rather absently.

"What? Why, his upper lip; see how he is drawing it down, as if he meant to make a face. Isn't it wonderful! He may have his little thoughts. I wish nurse were here. Do look at him."

A large tear which had been for some time gathering rolled down Dorothea's cheek as she looked up and tried to smile.

"Don't be sad, Dodo; kiss baby. What are you brooding over so? I am sure you did everything, and a great deal too much. You should be happy now."

"I wonder if Sir James would drive me to Lowick. I want to look over everything—to see if there were any words written for me."

"You are not to go till Mr. Lydgate says you may go. And he has not said so yet (here you are, nurse; take baby and walk up and down the gallery). Besides, you have got a wrong notion in your head as usual, Dodo—I can see that; it vexes me."

"Where am I wrong, Kitty?" said Dorothea quite meekly. She was almost ready now to think Celia wiser than herself, and was really wondering with some fear what her wrong notion was. Celia felt her advantage and was determined to use

it. None of them knew Dodo as well as she did or knew how to manage her. Since Celia's baby was born, she had had a new sense of her mental solidity and calm wisdom. It seemed clear that where there was a baby, things were right enough, and that error, in general, was a mere lack of that central poising force.

"I can see what you are thinking of as well as can be, Dodo," said Celia. "You are wanting to find out if there is anything uncomfortable for you to do now, only because Mr. Casaubon wished it. As if you had not been uncomfortable enough before. And he doesn't deserve it, and you will find that out. He has behaved very badly. James is as angry with him as can be. And I had better tell you, to prepare you."

"Celia," said Dorothea entreatingly, "you distress me. Tell me at once what you mean." It glanced through her mind that Mr. Casaubon had left the property away from her, which would not be so very distressing.

"Why, he has made a codicil to his will to say the property was all to go away from you if you married—I mean—"

"That is of no consequence," said Dorothea, breaking in impetuously.

"But if you married Mr. Ladislaw, not anybody else," Celia went on with persevering quietude. "Of course that is of no consequence in one way—you never *would* marry Mr. Ladislaw; but that only makes it worse of Mr. Casaubon."

The blood rushed to Dorothea's face and neck painfully. But Celia was administering what she thought a sobering dose of fact. It was taking up notions that had done Dodo's health so much harm. So she went on in her neutral tone as if she had been remarking on baby's robes.

"James says so. He says it is abominable, and not like a gentleman. And there never *was* a better judge than James. It is as if Mr. Casaubon wanted to make people believe that you would wish to marry Mr. Ladislaw, which is ridiculous. Only James says it was to hinder Mr. Ladislaw from wanting to marry you for your money—just as if he ever would think of making you an offer. Mrs. Cadwallader said you might as well marry an Italian with white mice! But I must just go and look at baby," Celia added without the least change of tone, throwing a light shawl over her and tripping away.

Dorothea by this time had turned cold again and now threw herself back helplessly in her chair. She might have compared her experience at that moment to the vague, alarmed consciousness that her life was taking on a new form, that she was undergoing a metamorphosis in which memory would not adjust itself to the stirring of new organs. Everything was changing its aspect: her husband's conduct, her own duteous feeling towards him, every struggle between them—and yet more, her whole relation to Will Ladislaw. Her world was in a state of convulsive change; the only thing she could say distinctly to herself was that she must wait and think anew. One change terrified her as if it had been a sin; it was a violent shock of repulsion from her departed husband, who had had hidden thoughts, perhaps perverting everything she said and did. Then again she was conscious of another change which also made her tremulous; it was a sudden strange yearning of heart towards Will Ladislaw. It had never before entered her mind that he could, under any circumstances, be her lover: conceive the effect of the sudden revelation that another had thought of him in that light, that perhaps he himself had been conscious of such a possibility, and this with the hurrying, crowding vision of unfitting conditions and questions not soon to be solved.

It seemed a long while—she did not know how long—before she heard Celia saying, "That will do, nurse; he will be quiet on my lap now. You can go to lunch, and let Garratt stay in the next room." "What I think, Dodo," Celia went on, observing nothing more than that Dorothea was leaning back in her chair, and likely to be passive, "is that Mr. Casaubon was spiteful. I never did like him, and James never did. I think the corners of his mouth were dreadfully spiteful. And now he has behaved in this way, I am sure religion does not require you to make yourself uncomfortable about him. If he has been taken away, that is a mercy, and you ought to be grateful. *We* should not grieve, should we, baby?" said Celia confidentially to that unconscious centre and poise of the world, who had the most remarkable fists all complete even to the nails and hair enough, really, when you took his cap off, to make—you didn't know what; in short, he was Buddha in a Western form.

At this crisis Lydgate was announced, and one of the first things he said was, "I fear you are not so well as you were, Mrs. Casaubon; have you been agitated? Allow me to feel your pulse." Dorothea's hand was of a marble coldness.

"She wants to go to Lowick to look over papers," said Celia. "She ought not, ought she?"

Lydgate did not speak for a few moments. Then he said, looking at Dorothea, "I hardly know. In my opinion Mrs. Casaubon should do what would give her the most repose of mind. That repose will not always come from being forbidden to act."

"Thank you," said Dorothea, exerting herself; "I am sure that is wise. There are so many things which I ought to attend to. Why should I sit here idle?" Then, with an effort to recall subjects not connected with her agitation, she added abruptly, "You know everyone in Middlemarch, I think, Mr. Lydgate. I shall ask you to tell me a great deal. I have serious things to do now. I have a living to give away. You know Mr. Tyke and all the—" But Dorothea's effort was too much for her; she broke off and burst into sobs.

Lydgate made her drink a dose of sal volatile.

"Let Mrs. Casaubon do as she likes," he said to Sir James whom he asked to see before quitting the house. "She wants perfect freedom, I think, more than any other prescription."

His attendance on Dorothea while her brain was excited had enabled him to form some true conclusions concerning the trials of her life. He felt sure that she had been suffering from the strain and conflict of self-repression and that she was likely now to feel herself only in another sort of pinfold than that from which she had been released.

Lydgate's advice was all the easier for Sir James to follow when he found that Celia had already told Dorothea the unpleasant fact about the will. There was no help for it now—no reason for any further delay in the execution of necessary business. And the next day Sir James complied at once with her request that he would drive her to Lowick.

"I have no wish to stay there at present," said Dorothea; "I could hardly bear it. I am much happier at Freshitt with Celia. I shall be able to think better about what should be done at Lowick by looking at it from a distance. And I should like to be at the Grange a little while with my uncle and go about in all the old walks and among the people in the village."

"Not yet, I think. Your uncle is having political company, and you are better out of the way of such doings," said Sir James, who at that moment thought of the Grange chiefly as a haunt of young Ladislaw's. But no word passed between him

and Dorothea about the objectionable part of the will; indeed, both of them felt that the mention of it between them would be impossible. Sir James was shy, even with men, about disagreeable subjects; and the one thing that Dorothea would have chosen to say if she had spoken on the matter at all was forbidden to her at present because it seemed to be a further exposure of her husband's injustice. Yet she did wish that Sir James could know what had passed between her and her husband about Will Ladislaw's moral claim on the property; it would then, she thought, be apparent to him as it was to her that her husband's strange, indelicate proviso had been chiefly urged by his bitter resistance to that idea of claim, and not merely by personal feelings more difficult to talk about. Also, it must be admitted, Dorothea wished that this could be known for Will's sake, since her friends seemed to think of him as simply an object of Mr. Casaubon's charity. Why should he be compared with an Italian carrying white mice? That word quoted from Mrs. Cadwallader seemed like a mocking travesty wrought in the dark by an impish finger.

At Lowick Dorothea searched desk and drawer; searched all her husband's places of deposit for private writing, but found no paper addressed especially to her except that "Synoptical Tabulation" which was probably only the beginning of many intended directions for her guidance. In carrying out this bequest of labour to Dorothea, as in all else, Mr. Casaubon had been slow and hesitating, oppressed in the plan of transmitting his work as he had been in executing it by the sense of moving heavily in a dim and clogging medium: distrust of Dorothea's competence to arrange what he had prepared was subdued only by distrust of any other redactor. But he had come at last to create a trust for himself out of Dorothea's nature; she could do what she resolved to do; and he willingly imagined her toiling under the fetters of a promise to erect a tomb with his name upon it. (Not that Mr. Casaubon called the future volumes a tomb; he called them the *Key to All Mythologies*.) But the months gained on him and left his plans belated; he had only had time to ask for that promise by which he sought to keep his cold grasp on Dorothea's life.

The grasp had slipped away. Bound by a pledge given from the depths of her pity, she would have been capable of undertaking a toil which her judgement whispered was vain for all uses except that consecration of faithfulness which is a supreme use. But now her judgement, instead of being controlled by duteous devotion, was made active by the embittering discovery that in her past union there had lurked the hidden alienation of secrecy and suspicion. The living, suffering man was no longer before her to awaken her pity; there remained only the retrospect of painful subjection to a husband whose thoughts had been lower than she had believed, whose exorbitant claims for himself had even blinded his scrupulous care for his own character and made him defeat his own pride by shocking men of ordinary honour. As for the property which was the sign of that broken tie, she would have been glad to be free from it and have nothing more than her original fortune which had been settled on her if there had not been duties attached to ownership which she ought not to flinch from. About this property many troublous questions insisted on rising: had she not been right in thinking that the half of it ought to go to Will Ladislaw? But was it not impossible now for her to do that act of justice? Mr. Casaubon had taken a cruelly effective means of hindering her; even with indignation against him in her heart, any act that seemed a triumphant eluding of his purpose revolted her.

After collecting papers of business which she wished to examine, she locked up again the desks and drawers—all empty of personal words for her, empty of any sign that in her husband's lonely brooding his heart had gone out to her in excuse or explanation; and she went back to Freshitt with the sense that around his last hard demand and his last injurious assertion of his power the silence was unbroken.

Dorothea tried now to turn her thoughts towards immediate duties, and one of these was of a kind which others were determined to remind her of. Lydgate's ear had caught eagerly her mention of the living, and as soon as he could, he reopened the subject, seeing here a possibility of making amends for the casting vote he had once given with an ill-satisfied conscience.

"Instead of telling you anything about Mr. Tyke," he said, "I should like to speak of another man—Mr. Farebrother, the vicar of St. Botolph's. His living is a poor one and gives him a stinted provision for himself and his family. His mother, aunt, and sister all live with him and depend upon him. I believe he has never married because of them. I never heard such good preaching as his—such plain, easy eloquence. He would have done to preach at St. Paul's Cross after old Latimer. His talk is just as good about all subjects: original, simple, clear. I think him a remarkable fellow; he ought to have done more than he has done."

"Why has he not done more?" said Dorothea, interested now in all who had slipped below their own intention.

"That's a hard question," said Lydgate. "I find myself that it's uncommonly difficult to make the right thing work: there are so many strings pulling at once. Farebrother often hints that he has got into the wrong profession; he wants a wider range than that of a poor clergyman, and I suppose he has no interest to help him on. He is very fond of natural history and various scientific matters, and he is hampered in reconciling these tastes with his position. He has no money to spare—hardly enough to use; and that has led him into card-playing—Middlemarch is a great place for whist. He does play for money, and he wins a good deal. Of course that takes him into company a little beneath him and makes him slack about some things; and yet, with all that, looking at him as a whole, I think he is one of the most blameless men I ever knew. He has neither venom nor doubleness in him, and those often go with a more correct outside."

"I wonder whether he suffers in his conscience because of that habit," said Dorothea; "I wonder whether he wishes he could leave it off."

"I have no doubt he would leave it off if he were transplanted into plenty: he would be glad of the time for other things."

"My uncle says that Mr. Tyke is spoken of as an apostolic man," said Dorothea meditatively. She was wishing it were possible to restore the times of primitive zeal and yet thinking of Mr. Farebrother with a strong desire to rescue him from his chance-gotten money.

"I don't pretend to say that Farebrother is apostolic," said Lydgate. "His position is not quite like that of the Apostles; he is only a parson among parishioners whose lives he has to try and make better. Practically I find that what is called being apostolic now is an impatience of everything in which the parson doesn't cut the principal figure. I see something of that in Mr. Tyke at the hospital: a good deal of his doctrine is a sort of pinching hard to make people uncomfortably aware of him.

Besides, an apostolic man at Lowick! He ought to think, as St. Francis did, that it is needful to preach to the birds."

"True," said Dorothea. "It is hard to imagine what sort of notions our farmers and labourers get from their teaching. I have been looking into a volume of sermons by Mr. Tyke: such sermons would be of no use at Lowick—I mean, about imputed righteousness and the prophecies in the Apocalypse. I have always been thinking of the different ways in which Christianity is taught, and whenever I find one way that makes it a wider blessing than any other, I cling to that as the truest—I mean that which takes in the most good of all kinds and brings in the most people as sharers in it. It is surely better to pardon too much than to condemn too much. But I should like to see Mr. Farebrother and hear him preach."

"Do," said Lydgate; "I trust to the effect of that. He is very much beloved, but he has his enemies too; there are always people who can't forgive an able man for differing from them. And that money-winning business is really a blot. You don't, of course, see many Middlemarch people, but Mr. Ladislaw, who is constantly seeing Mr. Brooke, is a great friend of Mr. Farebrother's old ladies and would be glad to sing the vicar's praises. One of the old ladies—Miss Noble, the aunt—is a wonderfully quaint picture of self-forgetful goodness, and Ladislaw gallants her about sometimes. I met them one day in a back street; you know Ladislaw's look—a sort of Daphnis in coat and waistcoat; and this little old maid reaching up to his arm—they looked like a couple dropped out of a romantic comedy. But the best evidence about Farebrother is to see him and hear him."

Happily Dorothea was in her private sitting-room when this conversation occurred, and there was no one present to make Lydgate's innocent introduction of Ladislaw painful to her. As was usual with him in matters of personal gossip, Lydgate had quite forgotten Rosamond's remark that she thought Will adored Mrs. Casaubon. At that moment he was only caring for what would recommend the Farebrother family, and he had purposely given emphasis to the worst that could be said about the vicar in order to forestall objections. In the weeks since Mr. Casaubon's death he had hardly seen Ladislaw, and he had heard no rumour to warn him that Mr. Brooke's confidential secretary was a dangerous subject with Mrs. Casaubon. When he was gone, his picture of Ladislaw lingered in her mind and disputed the ground with that question of the Lowick living. What was Will Ladislaw thinking about her? Would he hear of that fact which made her cheeks burn as they never used to do? And how would he feel when he heard it? But she could see as well as possible how he smiled down at the little old maid. An Italian with white mice! On the contrary, he was a creature who entered into everyone's feelings and could take the pressure of their thought instead of urging his own with iron resistance.

CHAPTER 51

Party is Nature too, and you shall see
By force of Logic how they both agree:
The Many in the One, the One in Many:
All is not Some, nor Some the same as Any:
Genus holds species, both are great or small;
One genus highest, one not high at all;
Each species has its differentia too,
This is not That, and He was never You,
Though this and that are AYES, and you and he
Are like as one to one, or three to three.

No gossip about Mr. Casaubon's will had yet reached Ladislaw; the air seemed to be filled with the dissolution of Parliament and the coming election, as the old wakes and fairs were filled with the rival clatter of itinerant shows; and more private noises were taken little notice of. The famous "dry election" was at hand, in which the depths of public feeling might be measured by the low flood-mark of drink. Will Ladislaw was one of the busiest at this time; and though Dorothea's widowhood was continually in his thought, he was so far from wishing to be spoken to on the subject that when Lydgate sought him out to tell him what had passed about the Lowick living, he answered rather waspishly, "Why should you bring me into the matter? I never see Mrs. Casaubon and am not likely to see her since she is at Freshitt. I never go there. It is Tory ground, where I and the *Pioneer* are no more welcome than a poacher and his gun."

The fact was that Will had been made the more susceptible by observing that Mr. Brooke, instead of wishing him, as before, to come to the Grange oftener than was quite agreeable to himself, seemed now to contrive that he should go there as little as possible. This was a shuffling concession of Mr. Brooke's to Sir James Chettam's indignant remonstrance; and Will, awake to the slightest hint in this direction, concluded that he was to be kept away from the Grange on Dorothea's account. Her friends, then, regarded him with some suspicion? Their fears were quite superfluous; they were very much mistaken if they imagined that he would put himself forward as a needy adventurer trying to win the favour of a rich woman.

Until now Will had never fully seen the chasm between himself and Dorothea—until now that he was come to the brink of it and saw her on the other side. He began, not without some inward rage, to think of going away from the neighbourhood: it would be impossible for him to show any further interest in Dorothea without subjecting himself to disagreeable imputations—perhaps even in her mind, which others might try to poison.

"We are forever divided," said Will. "I might as well be at Rome; she would be no farther from me." But what we call our despair is often only the painful eagerness of unfed hope. There were plenty of reasons why he should not go—public reasons why he should not quit his post at this crisis, leaving Mr. Brooke in the lurch when he needed "coaching" for the election and when there was so much canvassing, direct and indirect, to be carried on. Will could not like to leave his own chessmen in the heat of a game; and any candidate on the right side, even if his brain and marrow had been as soft as was consistent with a gentlemanly bearing, might help to turn a majority. To coach Mr. Brooke and keep him steadily to the idea that he must pledge himself to vote for the actual reform bill, instead of insisting on his independence and power of pulling up in time, was not an easy task. Mr. Farebrother's prophecy of a fourth candidate "in the bag" had not yet been fulfilled, neither the Parliamentary Candidate Society nor any other power on the watch to secure a reforming majority seeing a worthy nodus for interference while there was a second reforming candidate like Mr. Brooke, who might be returned at his own expense. And the fight lay entirely between Pinkerton, the old Tory member, Bagster, the new Whig member returned at the last election, and Brooke, the future independent member, who was to fetter himself for this occasion only. Mr. Hawley and his party would bend all their forces to the return of Pinkerton, and Mr. Brooke's success must depend either on plumpers which would leave Bagster in the rear or on the new minting of Tory votes into reforming votes. The latter means, of course, would be preferable.

This prospect of converting votes was a dangerous distraction to Mr. Brooke; his impression that waverers were likely to be allured by wavering statements and also the liability of his mind to stick afresh at opposing arguments as they turned up in his memory gave Will Ladislaw much trouble.

"You know there are tactics in these things," said Mr. Brooke; "meeting people half-way—tempering your ideas—saying, 'Well now, there's something in that,' and so on. I agree with you that this is a peculiar occasion—the country with a will of its own—political unions—that sort of thing—but we sometimes cut with rather too sharp a knife, Ladislaw. These ten-pound householders, now: why ten? Draw the line somewhere—yes; but why just at ten? That's a difficult question, now, if you go into it."

"Of course it is," said Will impatiently. "But if you are to wait till we get a logical bill, you must put yourself forward as a revolutionist, and then Middlemarch would not elect you, I fancy. As for trimming, this is not a time for trimming."

Mr. Brooke always ended by agreeing with Ladislaw, who still appeared to him a sort of Burke with a leaven of Shelley; but after an interval the wisdom of his own methods reasserted itself and he was again drawn into using them with much hopefulness. At this stage of affairs he was in excellent spirits, which even supported him under large advances of money;

for his powers of convincing and persuading had not yet been tested by anything more difficult than a chairman's speech introducing other orators, or a dialogue with a Middlemarch voter, from which he came away with a sense that he was a tactician by nature and that it was a pity he had not gone earlier into this kind of thing. He was a little conscious of defeat, however, with Mr. Mawmsey, a chief representative in Middlemarch of that great social power, the retail trader, and naturally one of the most doubtful voters in the borough—willing for his own part to supply an equal quality of teas and sugars to reformer and anti-reformer, as well as to agree impartially with both, and feeling like the burgesses of old that this necessity of electing members was a great burden to a town; for even if there were no danger in holding out hopes to all parties beforehand, there would be the painful necessity at last of disappointing respectable people whose names were on his books. He was accustomed to receive large orders from Mr. Brooke of Tipton; but then, there were many of Pinkerton's committee whose opinions had a great weight of grocery on their side. Mr. Mawmsey, thinking that Mr. Brooke, as not too "clever in his intellects," was the more likely to forgive a grocer who gave a hostile vote under pressure, had become confidential in his back parlour.

"As to reform, sir, put it in a family light," he said, rattling the small silver in his pocket and smiling affably. "Will it support Mrs. Mawmsey and enable her to bring up six children when I am no more? I put the question *fictiously*, knowing what must be the answer. Very well, sir. I ask you what, as a husband and a father, I am to do when gentlemen come to me and say, 'Do as you like, Mawmsey, but if you vote against us, I shall get my groceries elsewhere; when I sugar my liquor I feel like that I am benefiting the country by maintaining tradesmen of the right colour.' Those very words have been spoken to me, sir, in the very chair where you are now sitting. I don't mean by your honourable self, Mr. Brooke."

"No, no, no—that's narrow, you know. Until my butler complains to me of your goods, Mr. Mawmsey," said Mr. Brooke soothingly, "until I hear that you send bad sugars, spices—that sort of thing—I shall never order him to go elsewhere."

"Sir, I am your humble servant, and greatly obliged," said Mr. Mawmsey, feeling that politics were clearing up a little. "There would be some pleasure in voting for a gentleman who speaks in that honourable manner."

"Well, you know, Mr. Mawmsey, you would find it the right thing to put yourself on our side. This reform will touch everybody by and by—a thoroughly popular measure—a sort of ABC, you know, that must come first before the rest can follow. I quite agree with you that you've got to look at the thing in a family light; but public spirit, now. We're all one family, you know—it's all one cupboard. Such a thing as a vote, now; why, it may help to make men's fortunes at the Cape—there's no knowing what may be the effect of a vote," Mr. Brooke ended, with a sense of being a little out at sea, though finding it still enjoyable. But Mr. Mawmsey answered in a tone of decisive check.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I can't afford that. When I give a vote I must know what I'm doing; I must look to what will be the effects on my till and ledger, speaking respectfully. Prices, I'll admit, are what nobody can know the merits of; and the sudden falls after you've bought in currants, which are a goods that will not keep—I've never myself seen into the ins and outs there; which is a rebuke to human pride. But as to one family, there's debtor and creditor, I hope; they're not going to reform that away; else I should vote for things staying as they are. Few men have less need to cry for change than I have, personally speaking—that is, for self and family. I am not one of those who have nothing to lose: I mean as to respectability both in parish and private business, and noways in respect of your honourable self and custom, which you was good enough to say you would not withdraw from me, vote or no vote, while the article sent in was satisfactory."

After this conversation Mr. Mawmsey went up and boasted to his wife that he had been rather too many for Brooke of Tipton, and that he didn't mind so much now about going to the poll.

Mr. Brooke on this occasion abstained from boasting of his tactics to Ladislaw, who for his part was glad enough to persuade himself that he had no concern with any canvassing except the purely argumentative sort and that he worked no meaner engine than knowledge. Mr. Brooke, necessarily, had his agents, who understood the nature of the Middlemarch voter and the means of enlisting his ignorance on the side of the bill—which were remarkably similar to the means of enlisting it on the side against the bill. Will stopped his ears. Occasionally Parliament, like the rest of our lives, even to our eating and apparel, could hardly go on if our imaginations were too active about processes. There were plenty of dirty-handed men in the world to do dirty business, and Will protested to himself that his share in bringing Mr. Brooke through would be quite innocent.

But whether he should succeed in that mode of contributing to the majority on the right side was very doubtful to him. He had written out various speeches and memoranda for speeches, but he had begun to perceive that Mr. Brooke's mind, if it had the burden of remembering any train of thought, would let it drop, run away in search of it, and not easily come back again. To collect documents is one mode of serving your country, and to remember the contents of a document is another. No! The only way in which Mr. Brooke could be coerced into thinking of the right arguments at the right time was to be well plied with them till they took up all the room in his brain. But here there was the difficulty of finding room, so many things having been taken in beforehand. Mr. Brooke himself observed that his ideas stood rather in his way when he was speaking.

However, Ladislaw's coaching was forthwith to be put to the test, for before the day of nomination Mr. Brooke was to explain himself to the worthy electors of Middlemarch from the balcony of the White Hart, which looked out advantageously at an angle of the market-place, commanding a large area in front and two converging streets. It was a fine May morning, and everything seemed hopeful: there was some prospect of an understanding between Bagster's committee and Brooke's, to which Mr. Bulstrode, Mr. Standish as a Liberal lawyer, and such manufacturers as Mr. Plymdale and Mr. Vincy gave a solidity which almost counterbalanced Mr. Hawley and his associates, who sat for Pinkerton at the Green Dragon. Mr. Brooke, conscious of having weakened the blasts of the *Trumpet* against him, by his reforms as a landlord in the last half year, and hearing himself cheered a little as he drove into the town, felt his heart tolerably light under his buff-coloured waistcoat. But with regard to critical occasions, it often happens that all moments seem comfortably remote until the last.

"This looks well, eh?" said Mr. Brooke as the crowd gathered. "I shall have a good audience, at any rate. I like this, now—this kind of public made up of one's own neighbours, you know."

The weavers and tanners of Middlemarch, unlike Mr. Mawmsey, had never thought of Mr. Brooke as a neighbour and

were not more attached to him than if he had been sent in a box from London. But they listened without much disturbance to the speakers who introduced the candidate, though one of them—a political personage from Brassing, who came to tell Middlemarch its duty—spoke so fully that it was alarming to think what the candidate could find to say after him. Meanwhile the crowd became denser, and as the political personage neared the end of his speech, Mr. Brooke felt a remarkable change in his sensations while he still handled his eyeglass, trifled with documents before him, and exchanged remarks with his committee as a man to whom the moment of summons was indifferent.

"I'll take another glass of sherry, Ladislaw," he said with an easy air to Will, who was close behind him and presently handed him the supposed fortifier. It was ill-chosen; for Mr. Brooke was an abstemious man, and to drink a second glass of sherry quickly at no great interval from the first was a surprise to his system which tended to scatter his energies instead of collecting them. Pray pity him; so many English gentlemen make themselves miserable by speechifying on entirely private grounds, whereas Mr. Brooke wished to serve his country by standing for Parliament—which, indeed, may also be done on private grounds, but being once undertaken does absolutely demand some speechifying.

It was not about the beginning of his speech that Mr. Brooke was at all anxious; this, he felt sure, would be all right; he should have it quite pat, cut out as neatly as a set of couplets from Pope. Embarking would be easy, but the vision of open sea that might come after was alarming. "And questions, now," hinted the demon just waking up in his stomach; "somebody may put questions about the schedules. Ladislaw," he continued, aloud, "just hand me the memorandum of the schedules."

When Mr. Brooke presented himself on the balcony, the cheers were quite loud enough to counterbalance the yells, groans, brayings, and other expressions of adverse theory, which were so moderate that Mr. Standish (decidedly an old bird) observed in the ear next to him, "This looks dangerous, by God! Hawley has got some deeper plan than this." Still, the cheers were exhilarating, and no candidate could look more amiable than Mr. Brooke, with the memorandum in his breast pocket, his left hand on the rail of the balcony, and his right trifling with his eyeglass. The striking points in his appearance were his buff waistcoat, short-clipped blond hair, and neutral physiognomy. He began with some confidence.

"Gentlemen—electors of Middlemarch!"

This was so much the right thing that a little pause after it seemed natural.

"I'm uncommonly glad to be here—I was never so proud and happy in my life—never so happy, you know."

This was a bold figure of speech, but not exactly the right thing; for, unhappily, the pat opening had slipped away—even couplets from Pope may be but "fallings from us, vanishings," when fear clutches us and a glass of sherry is hurrying like smoke among our ideas. Ladislaw, who stood at the window behind the speaker, thought, "It's all up now. The only chance is that, since the best thing won't always do, floundering may answer for once." Mr. Brooke, meanwhile, having lost other clues, fell back on himself and his qualifications—always an appropriate graceful subject for a candidate.

"I am a close neighbour of yours, my good friends—you've known me on the bench a good while—I've always gone a good deal into public questions—machinery, now, and machine-breaking—you're many of you concerned with machinery, and I've been going into that lately. It won't do, you know, breaking machines; everything must go on—trade, manufactures, commerce, interchange of staples—that kind of thing—since Adam Smith, that must go on. We must look all over the globe—'Observation with extensive view,' must look everywhere, 'from China to Peru,' as somebody says—Johnson, I think, *The Rambler*, you know. This is what I have done up to a certain point—not as far as Peru; but I've not always stayed at home—I saw it wouldn't do. I've been in the Levant, where some of your Middlemarch goods go—and then, again, in the Baltic. The Baltic, now."

Plying among his recollections in this way, Mr. Brooke might have got along, easily to himself, and would have come back from the remotest seas without trouble; but a diabolical procedure had been set up by the enemy. At one and the same moment there had risen above the shoulders of the crowd, nearly opposite Mr. Brooke and within ten yards of him, the effigy of himself, buff-coloured waistcoat, eyeglass, and neutral physiognomy painted on rag; and there had arisen, apparently in the air, like the note of the cuckoo, a parrot-like, Punch-voiced echo of his words. Everybody looked up at the open windows in the houses at the opposite angles of the converging streets, but they were either blank or filled by laughing listeners. The most innocent echo has an impish mockery in it when it follows a gravely persistent speaker, and this echo was not at all innocent; if it did not follow with the precision of a natural echo, it had a wicked choice of the words it overtook. By the time it said, "The Baltic, now," the laugh which had been running through the audience became a general shout, and but for the sobering effects of party and that great public cause which the entanglement of things had identified with "Brooke of Tipton," the laugh might have caught his committee. Mr. Bulstrode asked, reprehensively, what the new police was doing; but a voice could not well be collared, and an attack on the effigy of the candidate would have been too equivocal, since Hawley probably meant it to be pelted.

Mr. Brooke himself was not in a position to be quickly conscious of anything except a general slipping away of ideas within himself; he had even a little singing in the ears, and he was the only person who had not yet taken distinct account of the echo or discerned the image of himself. Few things hold the perceptions more thoroughly captive than anxiety about what we have got to say. Mr. Brooke heard the laughter, but he had expected some Tory efforts at disturbance, and he was at this moment additionally excited by the tickling, stinging sense that his lost exordium was coming back to fetch him from the Baltic.

"That reminds me," he went on, thrusting a hand into his side pocket with an easy air, "if I wanted a precedent, you know—but we never want a precedent for the right thing—but there is Chatham, now; I can't say I should have supported Chatham, or Pitt, the younger Pitt—he was not a man of ideas, and we want ideas, you know."

"Blast your ideas! We want the bill," said a loud rough voice from the crowd below.

Immediately the invisible Punch, who had hitherto followed Mr. Brooke, repeated, "Blast your ideas! We want the bill." The laugh was louder than ever, and for the first time Mr. Brooke, being himself silent, heard distinctly the mocking echo. But it seemed to ridicule his interrupter, and in that light was encouraging; so he replied with amenity, "There is something in what you say, my good friend, and what do we meet for but to speak our minds—freedom of opinion, freedom of the press, liberty—that kind of thing? The bill, now—you shall have the bill"—here Mr. Brooke paused a moment to fix on his

eyeglass and take the paper from his breast pocket, with a sense of being practical and coming to particulars.

The invisible Punch followed, “You shall have the bill, Mr. Brooke, per electioneering contest, and a seat outside Parliament as delivered, five thousand pounds, seven shillings, and fourpence.”

Mr. Brooke, amid the roars of laughter, turned red, let his eyeglass fall, and looking about him confusedly, saw the image of himself, which had come nearer. The next moment he saw it dolorously bespattered with eggs. His spirit rose a little, and his voice too.

“Buffoonery, tricks, ridicule the test of truth—all that is very well.” Here an unpleasant egg broke on Mr. Brooke’s shoulder as the echo said, “All that is very well”; then came a hail of eggs, chiefly aimed at the image, but occasionally hitting the original, as if by chance. There was a stream of new men pushing among the crowd; whistles, yells, bellowings, and fifes made all the greater hubbub because there was shouting and struggling to put them down. No voice would have had wing enough to rise above the uproar, and Mr. Brooke, disagreeably anointed, stood his ground no longer. The frustration would have been less exasperating if it had been less gamesome and boyish: a serious assault of which the newspaper reporter “can aver that it endangered the learned gentleman’s ribs,” or can respectfully bear witness to “the soles of that gentleman’s boots having been visible above the railing,” had perhaps more consolations attached to it.

Mr. Brooke re-entered the committee-room, saying as carelessly as he could, “This is a little too bad, you know. I should have got the ear of the people by and by—but they didn’t give me time. I should have gone into the bill by and by, you know,” he added, glancing at Ladislaw. “However, things will come all right at the nomination.”

But it was not resolved unanimously that things would come right; on the contrary, the committee looked rather grim, and the political personage from Brassing was writing busily, as if he were brewing new devices.

“It was Bowyer who did it,” said Mr. Standish evasively. “I know it as well as if it had been advertised. He’s uncommonly good at ventriloquism, and he did it uncommonly well, by God! Hawley has been having him to dinner lately; there’s a fund of talent in Bowyer.”

“Well, you know, you never mentioned him to me, Standish, else I would have invited him to dine,” said poor Mr. Brooke, who had gone through a great deal of inviting for the good of his country.

“There’s not a more paltry fellow in Middlemarch than Bowyer,” said Ladislaw indignantly, “but it seems as if the paltry fellows were always to turn the scale.”

Will was thoroughly out of temper with himself as well as with his “principal,” and he went to shut himself in his rooms with a half-formed resolve to throw up the *Pioneer* and Mr. Brooke together. Why should he stay? If the impassable gulf between himself and Dorothea were ever to be filled up, it must rather be by his going away and getting into a thoroughly different position than by staying here and slipping into deserved contempt as an understrapper of Brooke’s. Then came the young dream of wonders that he might do—in five years, for example: political writing, political speaking, would get a higher value now public life was going to be wider and more national, and they might give him such distinction that he would not seem to be asking Dorothea to step down to him. Five years—if he could only be sure that she cared for him more than for others; if he could only make her aware that he stood aloof until he could tell his love without lowering himself; then he could go away easily and begin a career which at five-and-twenty seemed probable enough in the inward order of things, where talent brings fame, and fame everything else which is delightful. He could speak and he could write; he could master any subject if he chose, and he meant always to take the side of reason and justice, on which he would carry all his ardour. Why should he not one day be lifted above the shoulders of the crowd and feel that he had won that eminence well? Without doubt he would leave Middlemarch, go to town, and make himself fit for celebrity by “eating his dinners.”

But not immediately; not until some kind of sign had passed between him and Dorothea. He could not be satisfied until she knew why, even if he were the man she would choose to marry, he would not marry her. Hence he must keep his post and bear with Mr. Brooke a little longer.

But he soon had reason to suspect that Mr. Brooke had anticipated him in the wish to break up their connexion. Deputations without and voices within had concurred in inducing that philanthropist to take a stronger measure than usual for the good of mankind, namely, to withdraw in favour of another candidate, to whom he left the advantages of his canvassing machinery. He himself called this a strong measure, but observed that his health was less capable of sustaining excitement than he had imagined.

“I have felt uneasy about the chest—it won’t do to carry that too far,” he said to Ladislaw in explaining the affair. “I must pull up. Poor Casaubon was a warning, you know. I’ve made some heavy advances, but I’ve dug a channel. It’s rather coarse work—this electioneering, eh, Ladislaw? I dare say you are tired of it. However, we have dug a channel with the *Pioneer*—put things in a track, and so on. A more ordinary man than you might carry it on now—more ordinary, you know.”

“Do you wish me to give it up?” said Will, the quick colour coming in his face as he rose from the writing-table and took a turn of three steps with his hands in his pockets. “I am ready to do so whenever you wish it.”

“As to wishing, my dear Ladislaw, I have the highest opinion of your powers, you know. But about the *Pioneer*, I have been consulting a little with some of the men on our side, and they are inclined to take it into their hands—indemnify me to a certain extent—carry it on, in fact. And under the circumstances, you might like to give up—might find a better field. These people might not take that high view of you which I have always taken, as an *alter ego*, a right hand—though I always looked forward to your doing something else. I think of having a run into France. But I’ll write you any letters, you know—to Althorpe and people of that kind. I’ve met Althorpe.”

“I am exceedingly obliged to you,” said Ladislaw proudly. “Since you are going to part with the *Pioneer*, I need not trouble you about the steps I shall take. I may choose to continue here for the present.”

After Mr. Brooke had left him Will said to himself, “The rest of the family have been urging him to get rid of me, and he doesn’t care now about my going. I shall stay as long as I like. I shall go of my own movement, and not because they are afraid of me.”

CHAPTER 52

His heart
The lowliest duties on itself did lay.

—WORDSWORTH

On that June evening when Mr. Farebrother knew that he was to have the Lowick living, there was joy in the old-fashioned parlour, and even the portraits of the great lawyers seemed to look on with satisfaction. His mother left her tea and toast untouched, but sat with her usual pretty primness, only showing her emotion by that flush in the cheeks and brightness in the eyes which gave an old woman a touching momentary identity with her far-off youthful self, and saying decisively, "The greatest comfort, Camden, is that you have deserved it."

"When a man gets a good berth, Mother, half the deserving must come after," said the son, brimful of pleasure and not trying to conceal it. The gladness in his face was of that active kind which seems to have energy enough not only to flash outwardly, but to light up busy vision within: one seemed to see thoughts, as well as delight, in his glances.

"Now, Aunt," he went on, rubbing his hands and looking at Miss Noble, who was making tender little beaver-like noises, "there shall be sugar-candy always on the table for you to steal and give to the children, and you shall have a great many new stockings to make presents of, and you shall darn your own more than ever!"

Miss Noble nodded to her nephew with a subdued, half-frightened laugh, conscious of having already dropped an additional lump of sugar into her basket on the strength of the new preferment.

"As for you, Winny," the vicar went on, "I shall make no difficulty about your marrying any Lowick bachelor—Mr. Solomon Featherstone, for example—as soon as I find you are in love with him."

Miss Winifred, who had been looking at her brother all the while and crying heartily, which was her way of rejoicing, smiled through her tears and said, "You must set me the example, Cam; *you* must marry now."

"With all my heart. But who is in love with me? I am a seedy old fellow," said the vicar, rising, pushing his chair away, and looking down at himself. "What do you say, Mother?"

"You are a handsome man, Camden, though not so fine a figure of a man as your father," said the old lady.

"I wish you would marry Miss Garth, Brother," said Miss Winifred. "She would make us so lively at Lowick."

"Very fine! You talk as if young women were tied up to be chosen like poultry at market; as if I had only to ask and everybody would have me," said the vicar, not caring to specify.

"We don't want everybody," said Miss Winifred. "But *you* would like Miss Garth, Mother, shouldn't you?"

"My son's choice shall be mine," said Mrs. Farebrother with majestic discretion, "and a wife would be most welcome, Camden. You will want your whist at home when we go to Lowick, and Henrietta Noble never was a whist-player." (Mrs. Farebrother always called her tiny old sister by that magnificent name.)

"I shall do without whist now, Mother."

"Why so, Camden? In my time whist was thought an undeniable amusement for a good churchman," said Mrs. Farebrother, innocent of the meaning that whist had for her son and speaking rather sharply, as at some dangerous countenancing of new doctrine.

"I shall be too busy for whist; I shall have two parishes," said the vicar, preferring not to discuss the virtues of that game.

He had already said to Dorothea, "I don't feel bound to give up St. Botolph's. It is protest enough against the pluralism they want to reform if I give somebody else most of the money. The stronger thing is not to give up power, but to use it well."

"I have thought of that," said Dorothea. "So far as self is concerned, I think it would be easier to give up power and money than to keep them. It seems very unfitting that I should have this patronage, yet I felt that I ought not to let it be used by someone else instead of me."

"It is I who am bound to act so that you will not regret your power," said Mr. Farebrother.

His was one of the natures in which conscience gets the more active when the yoke of life ceases to gall them. He made no display of humility on the subject, but in his heart he felt rather ashamed that his conduct had shown laches which others who did not get benefices were free from.

"I used often to wish I had been something else than a clergyman," he said to Lydgate, "but perhaps it will be better to try and make as good a clergyman out of myself as I can. That is the well-beneficed point of view, you perceive, from which difficulties are much simplified," he ended, smiling.

The vicar did feel then as if his share of duties would be easy. But Duty has a trick of behaving unexpectedly—something like a heavy friend whom we have amiably asked to visit us and who breaks his leg within our gates.

Hardly a week later, Duty presented itself in his study under the disguise of Fred Vincy, now returned from Omnibus College with his bachelor's degree.

"I am ashamed to trouble you, Mr. Farebrother," said Fred, whose fair, open face was propitiating, "but you are the only friend I can consult. I told you everything once before, and you were so good that I can't help coming to you again."

"Sit down, Fred; I'm ready to hear and do anything I can," said the vicar, who was busy packing some small objects for removal and went on with his work.

“I wanted to tell you—” Fred hesitated an instant and then went on plungingly, “I might go into the Church now; and really, look where I may, I can’t see anything else to do. I don’t like it, but I know it’s uncommonly hard on my father to say so, after he has spent a good deal of money in educating me for it.” Fred paused again an instant, and then repeated, “And I can’t see anything else to do.”

“I did talk to your father about it, Fred, but I made little way with him. He said it was too late. But you have got over one bridge now; what are your other difficulties?”

“Merely that I don’t like it. I don’t like divinity, and preaching, and feeling obliged to look serious. I like riding across country and doing as other men do. I don’t mean that I want to be a bad fellow in any way, but I’ve no taste for the sort of thing people expect of a clergyman. And yet what else am I to do? My father can’t spare me any capital, else I might go into farming. And he has no room for me in his trade. And of course I can’t begin to study for law or physic now, when my father wants me to earn something. It’s all very well to say I’m wrong to go into the Church, but those who say so might as well tell me to go into the backwoods.”

Fred’s voice had taken a tone of grumbling remonstrance, and Mr. Farebrother might have been inclined to smile if his mind had not been too busy in imagining more than Fred told him.

“Have you any difficulties about doctrines—about the Articles?” he said, trying hard to think of the question simply for Fred’s sake.

“No; I suppose the Articles are right. I am not prepared with any arguments to disprove them, and much better, cleverer fellows than I am go in for them entirely. I think it would be rather ridiculous in me to urge scruples of that sort, as if I were a judge,” said Fred quite simply.

“I suppose, then, it has occurred to you that you might be a fair parish priest without being much of a divine?”

“Of course, if I am obliged to be a clergyman, I shall try and do my duty, though I mayn’t like it. Do you think anybody ought to blame me?”

“For going into the Church under the circumstances? That depends on your conscience, Fred—how far you have counted the cost, and seen what your position will require of you. I can only tell you about myself, that I have always been too lax and have been uneasy in consequence.”

“But there is another hindrance,” said Fred, colouring. “I did not tell you before, though perhaps I may have said things that made you guess it. There is somebody I am very fond of; I have loved her ever since we were children.”

“Miss Garth, I suppose?” said the vicar, examining some labels very closely.

“Yes. I shouldn’t mind anything if she would have me. And I know I could be a good fellow then.”

“And you think she returns the feeling?”

“She never will say so; and a good while ago she made me promise not to speak to her about it again. And she has set her mind especially against my being a clergyman; I know that. But I can’t give her up. I do think she cares about me. I saw Mrs. Garth last night, and she said that Mary was staying at Lowick rectory with Miss Farebrother.”

“Yes, she is very kindly helping my sister. Do you wish to go there?”

“No, I want to ask a great favour of you. I am ashamed to bother you in this way, but Mary might listen to what you said if you mentioned the subject to her—I mean about my going into the Church.”

“That is rather a delicate task, my dear Fred. I shall have to presuppose your attachment to her, and to enter on the subject as you wish me to do will be asking her to tell me whether she returns it.”

“That is what I want her to tell you,” said Fred bluntly. “I don’t know what to do unless I can get at her feeling.”

“You mean that you would be guided by that as to your going into the Church?”

“If Mary said she would never have me I might as well go wrong in one way as another.”

“That is nonsense, Fred. Men outlive their love, but they don’t outlive the consequences of their recklessness.”

“Not my sort of love; I have never been without loving Mary. If I had to give her up, it would be like beginning to live on wooden legs.”

“Will she not be hurt at my intrusion?”

“No, I feel sure she will not. She respects you more than anyone, and she would not put you off with fun as she does me. Of course I could not have told anyone else or asked anyone else to speak to her but you. There is no one else who could be such a friend to both of us.” Fred paused a moment, and then said rather complainingly, “And she ought to acknowledge that I have worked in order to pass. She ought to believe that I would exert myself for her sake.”

There was a moment’s silence before Mr. Farebrother laid down his work, and putting out his hand to Fred, said, “Very well, my boy. I will do what you wish.”

That very day Mr. Farebrother went to Lowick parsonage on the nag which he had just set up. “Decidedly I am an old stalk,” he thought; “the young growths are pushing me aside.”

He found Mary in the garden gathering roses and sprinkling the petals on a sheet. The sun was low, and tall trees sent their shadows across the grassy walks where Mary was moving without bonnet or parasol. She did not observe Mr. Farebrother’s approach along the grass and had just stooped down to lecture a small black-and-tan terrier which would persist in walking on the sheet and smelling at the rose-leaves as Mary sprinkled them. She took his forepaws in one hand and lifted up the forefinger of the other, while the dog wrinkled his brows and looked embarrassed. “Fly, Fly, I am ashamed of you,” Mary was saying in a grave contralto. “This is not becoming in a sensible dog; anybody would think you were a silly young gentleman.”

“You are unmerciful to young gentlemen, Miss Garth,” said the vicar, within two yards of her.

Mary started up and blushed. “It always answers to reason with Fly,” she said laughingly.

“But not with young gentlemen?”

“Oh, with some, I suppose, since some of them turn into excellent men.”

“I am glad of that admission because I want at this very moment to interest you in a young gentleman.”

“Not a silly one, I hope,” said Mary, beginning to pluck the roses again and feeling her heart beat uncomfortably.

“No; though perhaps wisdom is not his strong point, but rather affection and sincerity. However, wisdom lies more in

those two qualities than people are apt to imagine. I hope you know by those remarks what gentleman I mean."

"Yes, I think I do," said Mary bravely, her face getting more serious and her hands cold; "it must be Fred Vincy."

"He has asked me to consult you about his going into the Church. I hope you will not think that I consented to take a liberty in promising to do so."

"On the contrary, Mr. Farebrother," said Mary, giving up the roses and folding her arms, but unable to look up; "whenever you have anything to say to me I feel honoured."

"But before I enter on that question, let me just touch a point on which your father took me into confidence; by the way, it was that very evening on which I once before fulfilled a mission from Fred, just after he had gone to college. Mr. Garth told me what happened on the night of Featherstone's death—how you refused to burn the will; and he said that you had some heart-prickings on that subject because you had been the innocent means of hindering Fred from getting his ten thousand pounds. I have kept that in mind, and I have heard something that may relieve you on that score—may show you that no sin-offering is demanded from you there."

Mr. Farebrother paused a moment and looked at Mary. He meant to give Fred his full advantage, but it would be well, he thought, to clear her mind of any superstitions such as women sometimes follow when they do a man the wrong of marrying him as an act of atonement. Mary's cheeks had begun to burn a little, and she was mute.

"I mean that your action made no real difference to Fred's lot. I find that the first will would not have been legally good after the burning of the last; it would not have stood if it had been disputed, and you may be sure it would have been disputed. So on that score you may feel your mind free."

"Thank you, Mr. Farebrother," said Mary earnestly. "I am grateful to you for remembering my feelings."

"Well, now I may go on. Fred, you know, has taken his degree. He has worked his way so far, and now the question is, what is he to do? That question is so difficult that he is inclined to follow his father's wishes and enter the Church, though you know better than I do that he was quite set against that formerly. I have questioned him on the subject, and I confess I see no insuperable objection to his being a clergyman, as things go. He says that he could turn his mind to doing his best in that vocation, on one condition. If that condition were fulfilled I would do my utmost in helping Fred on. After a time—not, of course, at first—he might be with me as my curate, and he would have so much to do that his stipend would be nearly what I used to get as vicar. But I repeat that there is a condition without which all this good cannot come to pass. He has opened his heart to me, Miss Garth, and asked me to plead for him. The condition lies entirely in your feeling."

Mary looked so much moved that he said after a moment, "Let us walk a little." And when they were walking he added, "To speak quite plainly, Fred will not take any course which would lessen the chance that you would consent to be his wife; but with that prospect, he will try his best at anything you approve."

"I cannot possibly say that I will ever be his wife, Mr. Farebrother, but I certainly never will be his wife if he becomes a clergyman. What you say is most generous and kind; I don't mean for a moment to correct your judgement. It is only that I have my girlish, mocking way of looking at things," said Mary with a returning sparkle of playfulness in her answer which only made its modesty more charming.

"He wishes me to report exactly what you think," said Mr. Farebrother.

"I could not love a man who is ridiculous," said Mary, not choosing to go deeper. "Fred has sense and knowledge enough to make him respectable, if he likes, in some good worldly business, but I can never imagine him preaching and exhorting, and pronouncing blessings, and praying by the sick, without feeling as if I were looking at a caricature. His being a clergyman would be only for gentility's sake, and I think there is nothing more contemptible than such imbecile gentility. I used to think that of Mr. Crowse, with his empty face and neat umbrella and mincing little speeches. What right have such men to represent Christianity—as if it were an institution for getting up idiots genteelly—as if—" Mary checked herself. She had been carried along as if she had been speaking to Fred instead of Mr. Farebrother.

"Young women are severe; they don't feel the stress of action as men do, though perhaps I ought to make you an exception there. But you don't put Fred Vincy on so low a level as that?"

"No indeed; he has plenty of sense, but I think he would not show it as a clergyman. He would be a piece of professional affectation."

"Then the answer is quite decided. As a clergyman he could have no hope?"

Mary shook her head.

"But if he braved all the difficulties of getting his bread in some other way—will you give him the support of hope? May he count on winning you?"

"I think Fred ought not to need telling again what I have already said to him," Mary answered with a slight resentment in her manner. "I mean that he ought not to put such questions until he has done something worthy, instead of saying that he could do it."

Mr. Farebrother was silent for a minute or more, and then, as they turned and paused under the shadow of a maple at the end of a grassy walk, said, "I understand that you resist any attempt to fetter you, but either your feeling for Fred Vincy excludes your entertaining another attachment or it does not: either he may count on your remaining single until he shall have earned your hand or he may in any case be disappointed. Pardon me, Mary—you know I used to catechize you under that name—but when the state of a woman's affections touches the happiness of another life—of more lives than one—I think it would be the nobler course for her to be perfectly direct and open."

Mary in her turn was silent, wondering not at Mr. Farebrother's manner but at his tone, which had a grave, restrained emotion in it. When the strange idea flashed across her that his words had reference to himself, she was incredulous and ashamed of entertaining it. She had never thought that any man could love her except Fred, who had espoused her with the umbrella ring when she wore socks and little strapped shoes, still less that she could be of any importance to Mr. Farebrother, the cleverest man in her narrow circle. She had only time to feel that all this was hazy and perhaps illusory; but one thing was clear and determined—her answer.

"Since you think it my duty, Mr. Farebrother, I will tell you that I have too strong a feeling for Fred to give him up for anyone else. I should never be quite happy if I thought he was unhappy for the loss of me. It has taken such deep root in

me—my gratitude to him for always loving me best, and minding so much if I hurt myself, from the time when we were very little. I cannot imagine any new feeling coming to make that weaker. I should like better than anything to see him worthy of everyone's respect. But please tell him I will not promise to marry him till then; I should shame and grieve my father and mother. He is free to choose someone else."

"Then I have fulfilled my commission thoroughly," said Mr. Farebrother, putting out his hand to Mary, "and I shall ride back to Middlemarch forthwith. With this prospect before him, we shall get Fred into the right niche somehow, and I hope I shall live to join your hands. God bless you!"

"Oh, please stay and let me give you some tea," said Mary. Her eyes filled with tears, for something indefinable, something like the resolute suppression of a pain in Mr. Farebrother's manner, made her feel suddenly miserable, as she had once felt when she saw her father's hands trembling in a moment of trouble.

"No, my dear, no. I must get back."

In three minutes the vicar was on horseback again, having gone magnanimously through a duty much harder than the renunciation of whist, or even than the writing of penitential meditations.

CHAPTER 53

It is but a shallow haste which concludeth insincerity from what outsiders call inconsistency—putting a dead mechanism of “ifs” and “therefores” for the living myriad of hidden suckers whereby the belief and the conduct are wrought into mutual sustainment.

Mr. Bulstrode, when he was hoping to acquire a new interest in Lowick, had naturally had an especial wish that the new clergyman should be one whom he thoroughly approved; and he believed it to be a chastisement and admonition directed to his own shortcomings and those of the nation at large that just about the time when he came in possession of the deeds which made him the proprietor of Stone Court, Mr. Farebrother “read himself” into the quaint little church and preached his first sermon to the congregation of farmers, labourers, and village artisans. It was not that Mr. Bulstrode intended to frequent Lowick Church or to reside at Stone Court for a good while to come; he had bought the excellent farm and fine homestead simply as a retreat which he might gradually enlarge as to the land and beautify as to the dwelling until it should be conducive to the divine glory that he should enter on it as a residence, partially withdrawing from his present exertions in the administration of business and throwing more conspicuously on the side of Gospel truth the weight of local landed proprietorship, which Providence might increase by unforeseen occasions of purchase. A strong leading in this direction seemed to have been given in the surprising facility of getting Stone Court, when everyone had expected that Mr. Rigg Featherstone would have clung to it as the Garden of Eden. That was what poor old Peter himself had expected, having often, in imagination, looked up through the sods above him, and unobstructed by perspective, seen his frog-faced legatee enjoying the fine old place to the perpetual surprise and disappointment of other survivors.

But how little we know what would make paradise for our neighbours! We judge from our own desires, and our neighbours themselves are not always open enough even to throw out a hint of theirs. The cool and judicious Joshua Rigg had not allowed his parent to perceive that Stone Court was anything less than the chief good in his estimation, and he had certainly wished to call it his own. But as Warren Hastings looked at gold and thought of buying Daylesford, so Joshua Rigg looked at Stone Court and thought of buying gold. He had a very distinct and intense vision of his chief good, the vigorous greed which he had inherited having taken a special form by dint of circumstance; and his chief good was to be a money-changer. From his earliest employment as an errand-boy in a seaport, he had looked through the windows of the money-changers as other boys look through the windows of the pastry-cooks; the fascination had wrought itself gradually into a deep, special passion; he meant, when he had property, to do many things, one of them being to marry a genteel young person; but these were all accidents and joys that imagination could dispense with. The one joy after which his soul thirsted was to have a money-changer’s shop on a much-frequented quay, to have locks all round him of which he held the keys, and to look sublimely cool as he handled the breeding coins of all nations, while helpless Cupidity looked at him enviously from the other side of an iron lattice. The strength of that passion had been a power enabling him to master all the knowledge necessary to gratify it. And when others were thinking that he had settled at Stone Court for life, Joshua himself was thinking that the moment now was not far off when he should settle on the North Quay with the best appointments in safes and locks.

Enough. We are concerned with looking at Joshua Rigg’s sale of his land from Mr. Bulstrode’s point of view, and he interpreted it as a cheering dispensation conveying perhaps a sanction to a purpose which he had for some time entertained without external encouragement; he interpreted it thus, but not too confidently, offering up his thanksgiving in guarded phraseology. His doubts did not arise from the possible relations of the event to Joshua Rigg’s destiny, which belonged to the unmapped regions not taken under the providential government, except perhaps in an imperfect colonial way; but they arose from reflecting that this dispensation too might be a chastisement for himself, as Mr. Farebrother’s induction to the living clearly was.

This was not what Mr. Bulstrode said to any man for the sake of deceiving him: it was what he said to himself—it was as genuinely his mode of explaining events as any theory of yours may be, if you happen to disagree with him. For the egoism which enters into our theories does not affect their sincerity; rather, the more our egoism is satisfied, the more robust is our belief.

However, whether for sanction or for chastisement, Mr. Bulstrode, hardly fifteen months after the death of Peter Featherstone, had become the proprietor of Stone Court, and what Peter would say “if he were worthy to know” had become an inexhaustible and consolatory subject of conversation to his disappointed relatives. The tables were now turned on that dear brother departed, and to contemplate the frustration of his cunning by the superior cunning of things in general was a cud of delight to Solomon. Mrs. Waule had a melancholy triumph in the proof that it did not answer to make false Featherstones and cut off the genuine; and Sister Martha receiving the news in the Chalky Flats said, “Dear, dear! Then the Almighty could have been none so pleased with the alms-houses after all.”

Affectionate Mrs. Bulstrode was particularly glad of the advantage which her husband’s health was likely to get from the purchase of Stone Court. Few days passed without his riding thither and looking over some part of the farm with the bailiff, and the evenings were delicious in that quiet spot when the new hay-ricks lately set up were sending forth odours to mingle with the breath of the rich old garden. One evening, while the sun was still above the horizon and burning in

golden lamps among the great walnut boughs, Mr. Bulstrode was pausing on horseback outside the front gate waiting for Caleb Garth, who had met him by appointment to give an opinion on a question of stable drainage and was now advising the bailiff in the rick-yard.

Mr. Bulstrode was conscious of being in a good spiritual frame and more than usually serene under the influence of his innocent recreation. He was doctrinally convinced that there was a total absence of merit in himself; but that doctrinal conviction may be held without pain when the sense of demerit does not take a distinct shape in memory and revive the tingling of shame or the pang of remorse. Nay, it may be held with intense satisfaction when the depth of our sinning is but a measure for the depth of forgiveness, and a clenching proof that we are peculiar instruments of the divine intention. The memory has as many moods as the temper and shifts its scenery like a diorama. At this moment Mr. Bulstrode felt as if the sunshine were all one with that of far-off evenings when he was a very young man and used to go out preaching beyond Highbury. And he would willingly have had that service of exhortation in prospect now. The texts were there still, and so was his own faculty in expounding them. His brief reverie was interrupted by the return of Caleb Garth, who also was on horseback and was just shaking his bridle before starting, when he exclaimed, “Bless my heart! What’s this fellow in black coming along the lane? He’s like one of those men one sees about after the races.”

Mr. Bulstrode turned his horse and looked along the lane, but made no reply. The comer was our slight acquaintance Mr. Raffles, whose appearance presented no other change than such as was due to a suit of black and a crape hatband. He was within three yards of the horsemen now, and they could see the flash of recognition in his face as he whirled his stick upward, looking all the while at Mr. Bulstrode, and at last exclaiming, “By Jove, Nick, it’s you! I couldn’t be mistaken, though the five-and-twenty years have played old Boguy with us both! How are you, eh? You didn’t expect to see *me* here. Come, shake us by the hand.”

To say that Mr. Raffles’s manner was rather excited would be only one mode of saying that it was evening. Caleb Garth could see that there was a moment of struggle and hesitation in Mr. Bulstrode, but it ended in his putting out his hand coldly to Raffles and saying, “I did not indeed expect to see you in this remote country place.”

“Well, it belongs to a stepson of mine,” said Raffles, adjusting himself in a swaggering attitude. “I came to see him here before. I’m not so surprised at seeing you, old fellow, because I picked up a letter—what you may call a providential thing. It’s uncommonly fortunate I met you, though, for I don’t care about seeing my stepson: he’s not affectionate, and his poor mother’s gone now. To tell the truth, I came out of love to you, Nick; I came to get your address, for—look here!” Raffles drew a crumpled paper from his pocket.

Almost any other man than Caleb Garth might have been tempted to linger on the spot for the sake of hearing all he could about a man whose acquaintance with Bulstrode seemed to imply passages in the banker’s life so unlike anything that was known of him in Middlemarch that they must have the nature of a secret to pique curiosity. But Caleb was peculiar; certain human tendencies which are commonly strong were almost absent from his mind, and one of these was curiosity about personal affairs. Especially if there was anything discreditable to be found out concerning another man, Caleb preferred not to know it; and if he had to tell anybody under him that his evil doings were discovered, he was more embarrassed than the culprit. He now spurred his horse, and saying, “I wish you good evening, Mr. Bulstrode; I must be getting home,” set off at a trot.

“You didn’t put your full address to this letter,” Raffles continued. “That was not like the first-rate man of business you used to be. ‘The Shrubs’—they may be anywhere; you live near at hand, eh? Have cut the London concern altogether—perhaps turned country squire—have a rural mansion to invite me to. Lord, how many years it is ago! The old lady must have been dead a pretty long while—gone to glory without the pain of knowing how poor her daughter was, eh? But, by Jove! You’re very pale and pasty, Nick. Come, if you’re going home, I’ll walk by your side.”

Mr. Bulstrode’s usual paleness had in fact taken an almost deathly hue. Five minutes before, the expanse of his life had been submerged in its evening sunshine which shone backward to its remembered morning; sin seemed to be a question of doctrine and inward penitence, humiliation an exercise of the closet, the bearing of his deeds a matter of private vision adjusted solely by spiritual relations and conceptions of the divine purposes. And now, as if by some hideous magic, this loud red figure had risen before him in unmanageable solidity—an incorporate past which had not entered into his imagination of chastisements. But Mr. Bulstrode’s thought was busy, and he was not a man to act or speak rashly.

“I was going home,” he said, “but I can defer my ride a little. And you can, if you please, rest here.”

“Thank you,” said Raffles, making a grimace. “I don’t care now about seeing my stepson. I’d rather go home with you.”

“Your stepson, if Mr. Rigg Featherstone was he, is here no longer. I am master here now.”

Raffles opened wide eyes and gave a long whistle of surprise before he said, “Well, then, I’ve no objection. I’ve had enough walking from the coach-road. I never was much of a walker, or rider either. What I like is a smart vehicle and a spirited cob. I was always a little heavy in the saddle. What a pleasant surprise it must be to you to see me, old fellow!” he continued as they turned towards the house. “You don’t say so, but you never took your luck heartily—you were always thinking of improving the occasion—you’d such a gift for improving your luck.”

Mr. Raffles seemed greatly to enjoy his own wit and swung his leg in a swaggering manner which was rather too much for his companion’s judicious patience.

“If I remember rightly,” Mr. Bulstrode observed with chill anger, “our acquaintance many years ago had not the sort of intimacy which you are now assuming, Mr. Raffles. Any services you desire of me will be the more readily rendered if you will avoid a tone of familiarity which did not lie in our former intercourse and can hardly be warranted by more than twenty years of separation.”

“You don’t like being called Nick? Why, I always called you Nick in my heart, and though lost to sight, to memory dear. By Jove! My feelings have ripened for you like fine old cognac. I hope you’ve got some in the house now. Josh filled my flask well the last time.”

Mr. Bulstrode had not yet fully learned that even the desire for cognac was not stronger in Raffles than the desire to torment, and that a hint of annoyance always served him as a fresh cue. But it was at least clear that further objection was useless, and Mr. Bulstrode, in giving orders to the housekeeper for the accommodation of the guest, had a resolute air of

quietude.

There was the comfort of thinking that this housekeeper had been in the service of Rigg also and might accept the idea that Mr. Bulstrode entertained Raffles merely as a friend of her former master. When there was food and drink spread before his visitor in the wainscoted parlour, and no witness in the room, Mr. Bulstrode said, “Your habits and mine are so different, Mr. Raffles, that we can hardly enjoy each other’s society. The wisest plan for both of us will therefore be to part as soon as possible. Since you say that you wished to meet me, you probably considered that you had some business to transact with me. But under the circumstances I will invite you to remain here for the night, and I will myself ride over here early tomorrow morning—before breakfast, in fact, when I can receive any communication you have to make to me.”

“With all my heart,” said Raffles; “this is a comfortable place—a little dull for a continuance, but I can put up with it for a night, with this good liquor and the prospect of seeing you again in the morning. You’re a much better host than my stepson was, but Josh owed me a bit of a grudge for marrying his mother; and between you and me there was never anything but kindness.”

Mr. Bulstrode, hoping that the peculiar mixture of joviality and sneering in Raffles’s manner was a good deal the effect of drink, had determined to wait till he was quite sober before he spent more words upon him. But he rode home with a terribly lucid vision of the difficulty there would be in arranging any result that could be permanently counted on with this man. It was inevitable that he should wish to get rid of John Raffles, though his reappearance could not be regarded as lying outside the divine plan. The spirit of evil might have sent him to threaten Mr. Bulstrode’s subversion as an instrument of good, but the threat must have been permitted, and was a chastisement of a new kind. It was an hour of anguish for him very different from the hours in which his struggle had been securely private and which had ended with a sense that his secret misdeeds were pardoned and his services accepted. Those misdeeds even when committed—had they not been half sanctified by the singleness of his desire to devote himself and all he possessed to the furtherance of the divine scheme? And was he after all to become a mere stone of stumbling and a rock of offence? For who would understand the work within him? Who would not, when there was the pretext of casting disgrace upon him, confound his whole life and the truths he had espoused in one heap of obloquy?

In his closest meditations the life-long habit of Mr. Bulstrode’s mind clad his most egoistic terrors in doctrinal references to superhuman ends. But even while we are talking and meditating about the earth’s orbit and the solar system, what we feel and adjust our movements to is the stable earth and the changing day. And now within all the automatic succession of theoretic phrases, distinct and inmost as the shiver and the ache of oncoming fever when we are discussing abstract pain, was the forecast of disgrace in the presence of his neighbours and of his own wife. For the pain, as well as the public estimate of disgrace, depends on the amount of previous profession. To men who only aim at escaping felony, nothing short of the prisoner’s dock is disgrace. But Mr. Bulstrode had aimed at being an eminent Christian.

It was not more than half-past seven in the morning when he again reached Stone Court. The fine old place never looked more like a delightful home than at that moment: the great white lilies were in flower; the nasturtiums, their pretty leaves all silvered with dew, were running away over the low stone wall; the very noises all around had a heart of peace within them. But everything was spoiled for the owner as he walked on the gravel in front and awaited the descent of Mr. Raffles, with whom he was condemned to breakfast.

It was not long before they were seated together in the wainscoted parlour over their tea and toast, which was as much as Raffles cared to take at that early hour. The difference between his morning and evening self was not so great as his companion had imagined that it might be; the delight in tormenting was perhaps even the stronger because his spirits were rather less highly pitched. Certainly his manners seemed more disagreeable by the morning light.

“As I have little time to spare, Mr. Raffles,” said the banker, who could hardly do more than sip his tea and break his toast without eating it, “I shall be obliged if you will mention at once the ground on which you wished to meet with me. I presume that you have a home elsewhere and will be glad to return to it.”

“Why, if a man has got any heart, doesn’t he want to see an old friend, Nick? I must call you Nick—we always did call you young Nick when we knew you meant to marry the old widow. Some said you had a handsome family likeness to old Nick, but that was your mother’s fault, calling you Nicholas. Aren’t you glad to see me again? I expected an invite to stay with you at some pretty place. My own establishment is broken up now my wife’s dead. I’ve no particular attachment to any spot; I would as soon settle hereabout as anywhere.”

“May I ask why you returned from America? I considered that the strong wish you expressed to go there, when an adequate sum was furnished, was tantamount to an engagement that you would remain there for life.”

“Never knew that a wish to go to a place was the same thing as a wish to stay. But I did stay a matter of ten years; it didn’t suit me to stay any longer. And I’m not going again, Nick.” Here Mr. Raffles winked slowly as he looked at Mr. Bulstrode.

“Do you wish to be settled in any business? What is your calling now?”

“Thank you, my calling is to enjoy myself as much as I can. I don’t care about working any more. If I did anything it would be a little travelling in the tobacco line—or something of that sort, which takes a man into agreeable company. But not without an independence to fall back upon. That’s what I want; I’m not so strong as I was, Nick, though I’ve got more colour than you. I want an independence.”

“That could be supplied to you if you would engage to keep at a distance,” said Mr. Bulstrode, perhaps with a little too much eagerness in his undertone.

“That must be as it suits my convenience,” said Raffles coolly. “I see no reason why I shouldn’t make a few acquaintances hereabout. I’m not ashamed of myself as company for anybody. I dropped my portmanteau at the turnpike when I got down—change of linen—genuine—honour bright!—more than fronts and wristbands; and with this suit of mourning, straps and everything, I should do you credit among the nobs here.” Mr. Raffles had pushed away his chair and looked down at himself, particularly at his straps. His chief intention was to annoy Bulstrode, but he really thought that his appearance now would produce a good effect and that he was not only handsome and witty but clad in a mourning style which implied solid connexions.

“If you intend to rely on me in any way, Mr. Raffles,” said Bulstrode after a moment’s pause, “you will expect to meet my wishes.”

“Ah, to be sure,” said Raffles with a mocking cordiality. “Didn’t I always do it? Lord, you made a pretty thing out of me, and I got but little. I’ve often thought since, I might have done better by telling the old woman that I’d found her daughter and her grandchild: it would have suited my feelings better; I’ve got a soft place in my heart. But you’ve buried the old lady by this time, I suppose—it’s all one to her now. And you’ve got your fortune out of that profitable business which had such a blessing on it. You’ve taken to being a nob, buying land, being a country bashaw. Still in the dissenting line, eh? Still godly? Or taken to the Church as more genteel?”

This time Mr. Raffles’s slow wink and slight protrusion of his tongue was worse than a nightmare because it held the certitude that it was not a nightmare, but a waking misery. Mr. Bulstrode felt a shuddering nausea and did not speak, but was considering diligently whether he should not leave Raffles to do as he would and simply defy him as a slanderer. The man would soon show himself disreputable enough to make people disbelieve him. “But not when he tells any ugly-looking truth about *you*,” said discerning consciousness. And again: it seemed no wrong to keep Raffles at a distance, but Mr. Bulstrode shrank from the direct falsehood of denying true statements. It was one thing to look back on forgiven sins, nay, to explain questionable conformity to lax customs, and another to enter deliberately on the necessity of falsehood.

But since Bulstrode did not speak, Raffles ran on, by way of using time to the utmost.

“I’ve not had such fine luck as you, by Jove! Things went confoundedly with me in New York; those Yankees are cool hands, and a man of gentlemanly feelings has no chance with them. I married when I came back—a nice woman in the tobacco trade—very fond of me—but the trade was restricted, as we say. She had been settled there a good many years by a friend; but there was a son too much in the case. Josh and I never hit it off. However, I made the most of the position, and I’ve always taken my glass in good company. It’s been all on the square with me; I’m as open as the day. You won’t take it ill of me that I didn’t look you up before; I’ve got a complaint that makes me a little dilatory. I thought you were trading and praying away in London still, and didn’t find you there. But you see I was sent to you, Nick—perhaps for a blessing to both of us.”

Mr. Raffles ended with a jocose snuffle: no man felt his intellect more superior to religious cant. And if the cunning which calculates on the meanest feelings in men could be called intellect, he had his share, for under the blurting, rallying tone with which he spoke to Bulstrode there was an evident selection of statements, as if they had been so many moves at chess. Meanwhile Bulstrode had determined on his move, and he said with gathered resolution, “You will do well to reflect, Mr. Raffles, that it is possible for a man to overreach himself in the effort to secure undue advantage. Although I am not in any way bound to you, I am willing to supply you with a regular annuity—in quarterly payments—so long as you fulfil a promise to remain at a distance from this neighbourhood. It is in your power to choose. If you insist on remaining here, even for a short time, you will get nothing from me. I shall decline to know you.”

“Ha, ha!” said Raffles with an affected explosion. “That reminds me of a droll dog of a thief who declined to know the constable.”

“Your allusions are lost on me, sir,” said Bulstrode with white heat; “the law has no hold on me either through your agency or any other.”

“You can’t understand a joke, my good fellow. I only meant that I should never decline to know you. But let us be serious. Your quarterly payment won’t quite suit me. I like my freedom.”

Here Raffles rose and stalked once or twice up and down the room, swinging his leg and assuming an air of masterly meditation. At last he stopped opposite Bulstrode and said, “I’ll tell you what! Give us a couple of hundred—come, that’s modest—and I’ll go away—honour bright!—pick up my portmanteau and go away. But I shall not give up my liberty for a dirty annuity. I shall come and go where I like. Perhaps it may suit me to stay away and correspond with a friend; perhaps not. Have you the money with you?”

“No, I have one hundred,” said Bulstrode, feeling the immediate riddance too great a relief to be rejected on the ground of future uncertainties. “I will forward you the other if you will mention an address.”

“No, I’ll wait here till you bring it,” said Raffles. “I’ll take a stroll and have a snack, and you’ll be back by that time.”

Mr. Bulstrode’s sickly body, shattered by the agitations he had gone through since the last evening, made him feel abjectly in the power of this loud, invulnerable man. At that moment he snatched at a temporary repose to be won on any terms. He was rising to do what Raffles suggested when the latter said, lifting up his finger as if with a sudden recollection, “I did have another look after Sarah again, though I didn’t tell you; I’d a tender conscience about that pretty young woman. I didn’t find her, but I found out her husband’s name, and I made a note of it. But hang it, I lost my pocketbook. However, if I heard it, I should know it again. I’ve got my faculties as if I was in my prime, but names wear out, by Jove! Sometimes I’m no better than a confounded tax-paper before the names are filled in. However, if I hear of her and her family, you shall know, Nick. You’d like to do something for her now she’s your stepdaughter.”

“Doubtless,” said Mr. Bulstrode with the usual steady look of his light-grey eyes; “though that might reduce my power of assisting you.”

As he walked out of the room, Raffles winked slowly at his back and then turned towards the window to watch the banker riding away—virtually at his command. His lips first curled with a smile and then opened with a short, triumphant laugh.

“But what the deuce *was* the name?” he presently said, half aloud, scratching his head and wrinkling his brows horizontally. He had not really cared or thought about this point of forgetfulness until it occurred to him in his invention of annoyances for Bulstrode.

“It began with *L*; it was almost all *L*’s I fancy,” he went on with a sense that he was getting hold of the slippery name. But the hold was too slight, and he soon got tired of this mental chase, for few men were more impatient of private occupation or more in need of making themselves continually heard than Mr. Raffles. He preferred using his time in pleasant conversation with the bailiff and the housekeeper, from whom he gathered as much as he wanted to know about Mr. Bulstrode’s position in Middlemarch.

After all, however, there was a dull space of time which needed relieving with bread and cheese and ale, and when he was seated alone with these resources in the wainscoted parlour, he suddenly slapped his knee and exclaimed, “Ladislaw!” That action of memory which he had tried to set going, and had abandoned in despair, had suddenly completed itself without conscious effort—a common experience, agreeable as a completed sneeze, even if the name remembered is of no value. Raffles immediately took out his pocketbook and wrote down the name, not because he expected to use it, but merely for the sake of not being at a loss if he ever did happen to want it. He was not going to tell Bulstrode: there was no actual good in telling, and to a mind like that of Mr. Raffles there is always probable good in a secret.

He was satisfied with his present success, and by three o’clock that day he had taken up his portmanteau at the turnpike and mounted the coach, relieving Mr. Bulstrode’s eyes of an ugly black spot on the landscape at Stone Court, but not relieving him of the dread that the black spot might reappear and become inseparable even from the vision of his hearth.

BOOK VI

THE WIDOW AND THE WIFE

CHAPTER 54

Negli occhi porta la mia donna Amore;
Per che si fa gentil ciò ch'ella mira:
Ov'ella passa, ogni uom ver lei si gira,
E cui saluta fa tremar lo core.
Sicchè, bassando il viso, tutto smore,
E d'ogni suo difetto allor sospira:
Fuggon dinanzi a lei Superbia ed Ira:
Aiutatemi, donne, a farle onore.
Ogni dolcezza, ogni pensiero umile
Nasce nel core a chi parlar la sente;
Ond' è beato chi prima la vide.
Quel ch'ella par quand' un poco sorride,
Non si può dicer, nè tener a mente,
Si è nuovo miracolo gentile.

—DANTE: *La Vita Nuova*

By that delightful morning when the hayricks at Stone Court were scenting the air quite impartially, as if Mr. Raffles had been a guest worthy of finest incense, Dorothea had again taken up her abode at Lowick Manor. After three months Freshitt had become rather oppressive: to sit like a model for Saint Catherine looking rapturously at Celia's baby would not do for many hours in the day, and to remain in that momentous babe's presence with persistent disregard was a course that could not have been tolerated in a childless sister. Dorothea would have been capable of carrying baby joyfully for a mile if there had been need, and of loving it the more tenderly for that labour, but to an aunt who does not recognize her infant nephew as Buddha and has nothing to do for him but to admire, his behaviour is apt to appear monotonous and the interest of watching him exhaustible.

This possibility was quite hidden from Celia, who felt that Dorothea's childless widowhood fell in quite prettily with the birth of little Arthur (baby was named after Mr. Brooke).

"Dodo is just the creature not to mind about having anything of her own—children or anything!" said Celia to her husband. "And if she had had a baby, it never could have been such a dear as Arthur. Could it, James?"

"Not if it had been like Casaubon," said Sir James, conscious of some indirectness in his answer and of holding a strictly private opinion as to the perfections of his first-born.

"No! Just imagine? Really it was a mercy," said Celia; "and I think it is very nice for Dodo to be a widow. She can be just as fond of our baby as if it were her own, and she can have as many notions of her own as she likes."

"It is a pity she was not a queen," said the devout Sir James.

"But what should we have been then? We must have been something else," said Celia, objecting to so laborious a flight of imagination. "I like her better as she is."

Hence, when she found that Dorothea was making arrangements for her final departure to Lowick, Celia raised her eyebrows with disappointment, and in her quiet, unemphatic way shot a needle-arrow of sarcasm.

"What will you do at Lowick, Dodo? You say yourself there is nothing to be done there: everybody is so clean and well off, it makes you quite melancholy. And here you have been so happy going all about Tipton with Mr. Garth into the worst backyards. And now Uncle is abroad, you and Mr. Garth can have it all your own way; and I am sure James does everything you tell him."

"I shall often come here, and I shall see how baby grows all the better," said Dorothea.

"But you will never see him washed," said Celia; "and that is quite the best part of the day." She was almost pouting; it did seem to her very hard in Dodo to go away from the baby when she might stay.

"Dear Kitty, I will come and stay all night on purpose," said Dorothea; "but I want to be alone now, and in my own home. I wish to know the Farebrothers better and to talk to Mr. Farebrother about what there is to be done in Middlemarch."

Dorothea's native strength of will was no longer all converted into resolute submission. She had a great yearning to be at Lowick and was simply determined to go, not feeling bound to tell all her reasons. But everyone around her disapproved. Sir James was much pained and offered that they should all migrate to Cheltenham for a few months with the sacred ark, otherwise called a cradle; at that period a man could hardly know what to propose if Cheltenham were rejected.

The dowager Lady Chettam, just returned from a visit to her daughter in town, wished, at least, that Mrs. Vigo should be written to and invited to accept the office of companion to Mrs. Casaubon; it was not credible that Dorothea as a young widow would think of living alone in the house at Lowick. Mrs. Vigo had been reader and secretary to royal personages, and in point of knowledge and sentiments even Dorothea could have nothing to object to her.

Mrs. Cadwallader said privately, "You will certainly go mad in that house alone, my dear. You will see visions. We have all got to exert ourselves a little to keep sane, and call things by the same names as other people call them by. To be sure, for younger sons and women who have no money, it is a sort of provision to go mad; they are taken care of then. But you must not run into that. I dare say you are a little bored here with our good dowager, but think what a bore you might

become yourself to your fellow-creatures if you were always playing tragedy queen and taking things sublimely. Sitting alone in that library at Lowick you may fancy yourself ruling the weather; you must get a few people round you who wouldn't believe you if you told them. That is a good lowering medicine."

"I never called everything by the same name that all the people about me did," said Dorothea stoutly.

"But I suppose you have found out your mistake, my dear," said Mrs. Cadwallader, "and that is a proof of sanity."

Dorothea was aware of the sting, but it did not hurt her. "No," she said, "I still think that the greater part of the world is mistaken about many things. Surely one may be sane and yet think so, since the greater part of the world has often had to come round from its opinion."

Mrs. Cadwallader said no more on that point to Dorothea, but to her husband she remarked, "It will be well for her to marry again as soon as it is proper, if one could get her among the right people. Of course the Chettams would not wish it. But I see clearly a husband is the best thing to keep her in order. If we were not so poor I would invite Lord Triton. He will be marquis some day, and there is no denying that she would make a good marchioness; she looks handsomer than ever in her mourning."

"My dear Elinor, do let the poor woman alone. Such contrivances are of no use," said the easy rector.

"No use? How are matches made except by bringing men and women together? And it is a shame that her uncle should have run away and shut up the Grange just now. There ought to be plenty of eligible matches invited to Freshitt and the Grange. Lord Triton is precisely the man: full of plans for making the people happy in a soft-headed sort of way. That would just suit Mrs. Casaubon."

"Let Mrs. Casaubon choose for herself, Elinor."

"That is the nonsense you wise men talk! How can she choose if she has no variety to choose from? A woman's choice usually means taking the only man she can get. Mark my words, Humphrey. If her friends don't exert themselves, there will be a worse business than the Casaubon business yet."

"For heaven's sake, don't touch on that topic, Elinor! It is a very sore point with Sir James. He would be deeply offended if you entered on it to him unnecessarily."

"I have never entered on it," said Mrs. Cadwallader, opening her hands. "Celia told me all about the will at the beginning, without any asking of mine."

"Yes, yes; but they want the thing hushed up, and I understand that the young fellow is going out of the neighbourhood."

Mrs. Cadwallader said nothing, but gave her husband three significant nods, with a very sarcastic expression in her dark eyes.

Dorothea quietly persisted in spite of remonstrance and persuasion. So by the end of June the shutters were all opened at Lowick Manor, and the morning gazed calmly into the library, shining on the rows of notebooks as it shines on the weary waste planted with huge stones, the mute memorial of a forgotten faith; and the evening laden with roses entered silently into the blue-green boudoir where Dorothea chose oftenest to sit. At first she walked into every room, questioning the eighteen months of her married life and carrying on her thoughts as if they were a speech to be heard by her husband. Then, she lingered in the library and could not be at rest till she had carefully ranged all the notebooks as she imagined that he would wish to see them, in orderly sequence. The pity which had been the restraining, compelling motive in her life with him still clung about his image, even while she remonstrated with him in indignant thought and told him that he was unjust. One little act of hers may perhaps be smiled at as superstitious. The "Synoptical Tabulation for the Use of Mrs. Casaubon," she carefully enclosed and sealed, writing within the envelope, "I could not use it. Do you not see now that I could not submit my soul to yours by working hopelessly at what I have no belief in?—Dorothea." Then she deposited the paper in her own desk.

That silent colloquy was perhaps only the more earnest because underneath and through it all there was always the deep longing which had really determined her to come to Lowick. The longing was to see Will Ladislaw. She did not know any good that could come of their meeting: she was helpless; her hands had been tied from making up to him for any unfairness in his lot. But her soul thirsted to see him. How could it be otherwise? If a princess in the days of enchantment had seen a four-footed creature from among those which live in herds come to her once and again with a human gaze which rested upon her with choice and beseeching, what would she think of in her journeying, what would she look for when the herds passed her? Surely for the gaze which had found her and which she would know again. Life would be no better than candlelight tinsel and daylight rubbish if our spirits were not touched by what has been, to issues of longing and constancy. It was true that Dorothea wanted to know the Farebrothers better, and especially to talk to the new rector, but also true that remembering what Lydgate had told her about Will Ladislaw and little Miss Noble, she counted on Will's coming to Lowick to see the Farebrother family. The very first Sunday, *before* she entered the church, she saw him as she had seen him the last time she was there, alone in the clergyman's pew; but *when* she entered his figure was gone.

In the week-days when she went to see the ladies at the rectory, she listened in vain for some word that they might let fall about Will; but it seemed to her that Mrs. Farebrother talked of everyone else in the neighbourhood and out of it.

"Probably some of Mr. Farebrother's Middlemarch hearers may follow him to Lowick sometimes. Do you not think so?" said Dorothea, rather despising herself for having a secret motive in asking the question.

"If they are wise they will, Mrs. Casaubon," said the old lady. "I see that you set a right value on my son's preaching. His grandfather on my side was an excellent clergyman, but his father was in the law: most exemplary and honest nevertheless, which is a reason for our never being rich. They say Fortune is a woman and capricious. But sometimes she is a good woman and gives to those who merit, which has been the case with you, Mrs. Casaubon, who have given a living to my son."

Mrs. Farebrother recurred to her knitting with a dignified satisfaction in her neat little effort at oratory, but this was not what Dorothea wanted to hear. Poor thing! She did not even know whether Will Ladislaw was still at Middlemarch, and there was no one whom she dared to ask, unless it were Lydgate. But just now she could not see Lydgate without sending for him or going to seek him. Perhaps Will Ladislaw, having heard of that strange ban against him left by Mr. Casaubon,

had felt it better that he and she should not meet again, and perhaps she was wrong to wish for a meeting that others might find many good reasons against. Still "I do wish it" came at the end of those wise reflections as naturally as a sob after holding the breath. And the meeting did happen, but in a formal way quite unexpected by her.

One morning, about eleven, Dorothea was seated in her boudoir with a map of the land attached to the manor and other papers before her, which were to help her in making an exact statement for herself of her income and affairs. She had not yet applied herself to her work, but was seated with her hands folded on her lap, looking out along the avenue of limes to the distant fields. Every leaf was at rest in the sunshine; the familiar scene was changeless and seemed to represent the prospect of her life, full of motiveless ease—motiveless, if her own energy could not seek out reasons for ardent action. The widow's cap of those times made an oval frame for the face and had a crown standing up; the dress was an experiment in the utmost laying on of crape; but this heavy solemnity of clothing made her face look all the younger, with its recovered bloom, and the sweet, inquiring candour of her eyes.

Her reverie was broken by Tantripp, who came to say that Mr. Ladislaw was below and begged permission to see Madam if it were not too early.

"I will see him," said Dorothea, rising immediately. "Let him be shown into the drawing-room."

The drawing-room was the most neutral room in the house to her, the one least associated with the trials of her married life: the damask matched the woodwork, which was all white and gold; there were two tall mirrors and tables with nothing on them—in brief, it was a room where you had no reason for sitting in one place rather than in another. It was below the boudoir and had also a bow-window looking out on the avenue. But when Pratt showed Will Ladislaw into it, the window was open and a winged visitor, buzzing in and out now and then without minding the furniture, made the room look less formal and uninhabited.

"Glad to see you here again, sir," said Pratt, lingering to adjust a blind.

"I am only come to say good-bye, Pratt," said Will, who wished even the butler to know that he was too proud to hang about Mrs. Casaubon now she was a rich widow.

"Very sorry to hear it, sir," said Pratt, retiring. Of course, as a servant who was to be told nothing, he knew the fact of which Ladislaw was still ignorant and had drawn his inferences, indeed, had not differed from his betrothed Tantripp when she said, "*Your* master was as jealous as a fiend—and no reason. Madam would look higher than Mr. Ladislaw, else I don't know her. Mrs. Cadwallader's maid says there's a lord coming who is to marry her when the mourning's over."

There were not many moments for Will to walk about with his hat in his hand before Dorothea entered. The meeting was very different from that first meeting in Rome when Will had been embarrassed and Dorothea calm. This time he felt miserable but determined, while she was in a state of agitation which could not be hidden. Just outside the door she had felt that this longed-for meeting was after all too difficult, and when she saw Will advancing towards her, the deep blush which was rare in her came with painful suddenness. Neither of them knew how it was, but neither of them spoke. She gave her hand for a moment, and then they went to sit down near the window, she on one settee and he on another opposite. Will was peculiarly uneasy: it seemed to him not like Dorothea that the mere fact of her being a widow should cause such a change in her manner of receiving him; and he knew of no other condition which could have affected their previous relation to each other—except that, as his imagination at once told him, her friends might have been poisoning her mind with their suspicions of him.

"I hope I have not presumed too much in calling," said Will; "I could not bear to leave the neighbourhood and begin a new life without seeing you to say good-bye."

"Presumed? Surely not. I should have thought it unkind if you had not wished to see me," said Dorothea, her habit of speaking with perfect genuineness asserting itself through all her uncertainty and agitation. "Are you going away immediately?"

"Very soon, I think. I intend to go to town and eat my dinners as a barrister, since, they say, that is the preparation for all public business. There will be a great deal of political work to be done by and by, and I mean to try and do some of it. Other men have managed to win an honourable position for themselves without family or money."

"And that will make it all the more honourable," said Dorothea ardently. "Besides, you have so many talents. I have heard from my uncle how well you speak in public, so that everyone is sorry when you leave off, and how clearly you can explain things. And you care that justice should be done to everyone. I am so glad. When we were in Rome, I thought you only cared for poetry and art, and the things that adorn life for us who are well off. But now I know you think about the rest of the world."

While she was speaking Dorothea had lost her personal embarrassment and had become like her former self. She looked at Will with a direct glance, full of delighted confidence.

"You approve of my going away for years, then, and never coming here again till I have made myself of some mark in the world?" said Will, trying hard to reconcile the utmost pride with the utmost effort to get an expression of strong feeling from Dorothea.

She was not aware how long it was before she answered. She had turned her head and was looking out of the window on the rose-bushes, which seemed to have in them the summers of all the years when Will would be away. This was not judicious behaviour. But Dorothea never thought of studying her manners; she thought only of bowing to a sad necessity which divided her from Will. Those first words of his about his intentions had seemed to make everything clear to her; he knew, she supposed, all about Mr. Casaubon's final conduct in relation to him, and it had come to him with the same sort of shock as to herself. He had never felt more than friendship for her—had never had anything in his mind to justify what she felt to be her husband's outrage on the feelings of both: and that friendship he still felt. Something which may be called an inward silent sob had gone on in Dorothea before she said with a pure voice, just trembling in the last words as if only from its liquid flexibility, "Yes, it must be right for you to do as you say. I shall be very happy when I hear that you have made your value felt. But you must have patience. It will perhaps be a long while."

Will never quite knew how it was that he saved himself from falling down at her feet, when the "long while" came forth with its gentle tremor. He used to say that the horrible hue and surface of her crape dress was most likely the sufficient

controlling force. He sat still, however, and only said, “I shall never hear from you. And you will forget all about me.”

“No,” said Dorothea, “I shall never forget you. I have never forgotten anyone whom I once knew. My life has never been crowded, and seems not likely to be so. And I have a great deal of space for memory at Lowick, haven’t I?” She smiled.

“Good God!” Will burst out passionately, rising, with his hat still in his hand, and walking away to a marble table, where he suddenly turned and leaned his back against it. The blood had mounted to his face and neck, and he looked almost angry. It had seemed to him as if they were like two creatures slowly turning to marble in each other’s presence, while their hearts were conscious and their eyes were yearning. But there was no help for it. It should never be true of him that in this meeting to which he had come with bitter resolution he had ended by a confession which might be interpreted into asking for her fortune. Moreover, it was actually true that he was fearful of the effect which such confessions might have on Dorothea herself.

She looked at him from that distance in some trouble, imagining that there might have been an offence in her words. But all the while there was a current of thought in her about his probable want of money, and the impossibility of her helping him. If her uncle had been at home, something might have been done through him! It was this preoccupation with the hardship of Will’s wanting money, while she had what ought to have been his share, which led her to say, seeing that he remained silent and looked away from her, “I wonder whether you would like to have that miniature which hangs upstairs —I mean that beautiful miniature of your grandmother. I think it is not right for me to keep it if you would wish to have it. It is wonderfully like you.”

“You are very good,” said Will irritably. “No; I don’t mind about it. It is not very consoling to have one’s own likeness. It would be more consoling if others wanted to have it.”

“I thought you would like to cherish her memory—I thought”—Dorothea broke off an instant, her imagination suddenly warning her away from Aunt Julia’s history—“you would surely like to have the miniature as a family memorial.”

“Why should I have that, when I have nothing else! A man with only a portmanteau for his stowage must keep his memorials in his head.”

Will spoke at random; he was merely venting his petulance; it was a little too exasperating to have his grandmother’s portrait offered him at that moment. But to Dorothea’s feelings his words had a peculiar sting. She rose and said with a touch of indignation as well as hauteur, “You are much the happier of us two, Mr. Ladislaw, to have nothing.”

Will was startled. Whatever the words might be, the tone seemed like a dismissal; and quitting his leaning posture, he walked a little way towards her. Their eyes met, but with a strange, questioning gravity. Something was keeping their minds aloof, and each was left to conjecture what was in the other. Will had really never thought of himself as having a claim of inheritance on the property which was held by Dorothea and would have required a narrative to make him understand her present feeling.

“I never felt it a misfortune to have nothing till now,” he said. “But poverty may be as bad as leprosy if it divides us from what we most care for.”

The words cut Dorothea to the heart and made her relent. She answered in a tone of sad fellowship.

“Sorrow comes in so many ways. Two years ago I had no notion of that—I mean of the unexpected way in which trouble comes, and ties our hands, and makes us silent when we long to speak. I used to despise women a little for not shaping their lives more and doing better things. I was very fond of doing as I liked, but I have almost given it up,” she ended, smiling playfully.

“I have not given up doing as I like, but I can very seldom do it,” said Will. He was standing two yards from her with his mind full of contradictory desires and resolves—desiring some unmistakable proof that she loved him, and yet dreading the position into which such a proof might bring him. “The thing one most longs for may be surrounded with conditions that would be intolerable.”

At this moment Pratt entered and said, “Sir James Chettam is in the library, Madam.”

“Ask Sir James to come in here,” said Dorothea immediately. It was as if the same electric shock had passed through her and Will. Each of them felt proudly resistant, and neither looked at the other, while they awaited Sir James’s entrance.

After shaking hands with Dorothea, he bowed as slightly as possible to Ladislaw, who repaid the slightness exactly, and then going towards Dorothea, said, “I must say good-bye, Mrs. Casaubon, and probably for a long while.”

Dorothea put out her hand and said her good-bye cordially. The sense that Sir James was depreciating Will and behaving rudely to him roused her resolution and dignity; there was no touch of confusion in her manner. And when Will had left the room, she looked with such calm self-possession at Sir James, saying, “How is Celia?” that he was obliged to behave as if nothing had annoyed him. And what would be the use of behaving otherwise? Indeed, Sir James shrank with so much dislike from the association even in thought of Dorothea with Ladislaw as her possible lover that he would himself have wished to avoid an outward show of displeasure which would have recognized the disagreeable possibility. If anyone had asked him why he shrank in that way, I am not sure that he would at first have said anything fuller or more precise than “*that* Ladislaw!”—though on reflection he might have urged that Mr. Casaubon’s codicil, barring Dorothea’s marriage with Will, except under a penalty, was enough to cast unfitness over any relation at all between them. His aversion was all the stronger because he felt himself unable to interfere.

But Sir James was a power in a way unguessed by himself. Entering at that moment, he was an incorporation of the strongest reasons through which Will’s pride became a repellent force, keeping him asunder from Dorothea.

CHAPTER 55

Hath she her faults? I would you had them too.
They are the fruity must of soundest wine;
Or say, they are regenerating fire
Such as hath turned the dense black element
Into a crystal pathway for the sun.

If youth is the season of hope, it is often so only in the sense that our elders are hopeful about us; for no age is so apt as youth to think its emotions, partings, and resolves are the last of their kind. Each crisis seems final, simply because it is new. We are told that the oldest inhabitants in Peru do not cease to be agitated by the earthquakes, but they probably see beyond each shock and reflect that there are plenty more to come.

To Dorothea, still in that time of youth when the eyes with their long, full lashes look out after their rain of tears unsoiled and unwearied as a freshly opened passion-flower, that morning's parting with Will Ladislaw seemed to be the close of their personal relations. He was going away into the distance of unknown years, and if ever he came back he would be another man. The actual state of his mind—his proud resolve to give the lie beforehand to any suspicion that he would play the needy adventurer seeking a rich woman—lay quite out of her imagination, and she had interpreted all his behaviour easily enough by her supposition that Mr. Casaubon's codicil seemed to him, as it did to her, a gross and cruel interdict on any active friendship between them. Their young delight in speaking to each other and saying what no one else would care to hear was forever ended and become a treasure of the past. For this very reason she dwelt on it without inward check. That unique happiness too was dead, and in its shadowed, silent chamber she might vent the passionate grief which she herself wondered at. For the first time she took down the miniature from the wall and kept it before her, liking to blend the woman who had been too hardly judged with the grandson whom her own heart and judgement defended. Can anyone who has rejoiced in woman's tenderness think it a reproach to her that she took the little oval picture in her palm and made a bed for it there, and leaned her cheek upon it as if that would soothe the creatures who had suffered unjust condemnation? She did not know then that it was Love who had come to her briefly, as in a dream before awaking, with the hues of morning on his wings—that it was Love to whom she was sobbing her farewell as his image was banished by the blameless rigour of irresistible day. She only felt that there was something irrevocably amiss and lost in her lot, and her thoughts about the future were the more readily shapen into resolve. Ardent souls, ready to construct their coming lives, are apt to commit themselves to the fulfilment of their own visions.

One day that she went to Freshitt to fulfil her promise of staying all night and seeing baby washed, Mrs. Cadwallader came to dine, the rector being gone on a fishing excursion. It was a warm evening, and even in the delightful drawing-room, where the fine old turf sloped from the open window towards a lilied pool and well-planted mounds, the heat was enough to make Celia in her white muslin and light curls reflect with pity on what Dodo must feel in her black dress and close cap. But this was not until some episodes with baby were over and had left her mind at leisure. She had seated herself and taken up a fan for some time before she said in her quiet guttural, "Dear Dodo, do throw off that cap. I am sure your dress must make you feel ill."

"I am so used to the cap—it has become a sort of shell," said Dorothea, smiling. "I feel rather bare and exposed when it is off."

"I *must* see you without it; it makes us all warm," said Celia, throwing down her fan and going to Dorothea. It was a pretty picture to see this little lady in white muslin unfastening the widow's cap from her more majestic sister and tossing it on to a chair. Just as the coils and braids of dark-brown hair had been set free, Sir James entered the room. He looked at the released head, and said, "Ah!" in a tone of satisfaction.

"It was I who did it, James," said Celia. "Dodo need not make such a slavery of her mourning; she need not wear that cap any more among her friends."

"My dear Celia," said Lady Chettam, "a widow must wear her mourning at least a year."

"Not if she marries again before the end of it," said Mrs. Cadwallader, who had some pleasure in startling her good friend the dowager. Sir James was annoyed and leaned forward to play with Celia's Maltese dog.

"That is very rare, I hope," said Lady Chettam in a tone intended to guard against such events. "No friend of ours ever committed herself in that way except Mrs. Beevor, and it was very painful to Lord Grinsell when she did so. Her first husband was objectionable, which made it the greater wonder. And severely she was punished for it. They said Captain Beevor dragged her about by the hair and held up loaded pistols at her."

"Oh, if she took the wrong man!" said Mrs. Cadwallader, who was in a decidedly wicked mood. "Marriage is always bad then, first or second. Priority is a poor recommendation in a husband if he has got no other. I would rather have a good second husband than an indifferent first."

"My dear, your clever tongue runs away with you," said Lady Chettam. "I am sure you would be the last woman to marry again prematurely if our dear rector were taken away."

"Oh, I make no vows; it might be a necessary economy. It is lawful to marry again, I suppose; else we might as well be Hindus instead of Christians. Of course if a woman accepts the wrong man, she must take the consequences, and one who

does it twice over deserves her fate. But if she can marry blood, beauty, and bravery—the sooner the better."

"I think the subject of our conversation is very ill-chosen," said Sir James with a look of disgust. "Suppose we change it."

"Not on my account, Sir James," said Dorothea, determined not to lose the opportunity of freeing herself from certain oblique references to excellent matches. "If you are speaking on my behalf, I can assure you that no question can be more indifferent and impersonal to me than second marriage. It is no more to me than if you talked of women going fox-hunting; whether it is admirable in them or not, I shall not follow them. Pray let Mrs. Cadwallader amuse herself on that subject as much as on any other."

"My dear Mrs. Casaubon," said Lady Chettam in her stateliest way, "you do not, I hope, think there was any allusion to you in my mentioning Mrs. Beevor. It was only an instance that occurred to me. She was stepdaughter to Lord Grinsell; he married Mrs. Teveroy for his second wife. There could be no possible allusion to you."

"Oh no," said Celia. "Nobody chose the subject; it all came out of Dodo's cap. Mrs. Cadwallader only said what was quite true. A woman could not be married in a widow's cap, James."

"Hush, my dear!" said Mrs. Cadwallader. "I will not offend again. I will not even refer to Dido or Zenobia. Only what are we to talk about? I, for my part, object to the discussion of human nature, because that is the nature of rectors' wives."

Later in the evening, after Mrs. Cadwallader was gone, Celia said privately to Dorothea, "Really, Dodo, taking your cap off made you like yourself again in more ways than one. You spoke up just as you used to do when anything was said to displease you. But I could hardly make out whether it was James that you thought wrong or Mrs. Cadwallader."

"Neither," said Dorothea. "James spoke out of delicacy to me, but he was mistaken in supposing that I minded what Mrs. Cadwallader said. I should only mind if there were a law obliging me to take any piece of blood and beauty that she or anybody else recommended."

"But you know, Dodo, if you ever did marry, it would be all the better to have blood and beauty," said Celia, reflecting that Mr. Casaubon had not been richly endowed with those gifts and that it would be well to caution Dorothea in time.

"Don't be anxious, Kitty; I have quite other thoughts in my life. I shall never marry again," said Dorothea, touching her sister's chin and looking at her with indulgent affection. Celia was nursing her baby, and Dorothea had come to say good-night to her.

"Really—quite?" said Celia. "Not anybody at all—if he were very wonderful indeed?"

Dorothea shook her head slowly. "Not anybody at all. I have delightful plans. I should like to take a great deal of land, and drain it, and make a little colony where everybody should work, and all the work should be done well. I should know every one of the people and be their friend. I am going to have great consultations with Mr. Garth; he can tell me almost everything I want to know."

"Then you *will* be happy if you have a plan, Dodo," said Celia. "Perhaps little Arthur will like plans when he grows up, and then he can help you."

Sir James was informed that same night that Dorothea was really quite set against marrying anybody at all and was going to take to "all sorts of plans," just like what she used to have. Sir James made no remark. To his secret feeling, there was something repulsive in a woman's second marriage, and no match would prevent him from feeling it a sort of desecration for Dorothea. He was aware that the world would regard such a sentiment as preposterous, especially in relation to a woman of one-and-twenty, the practice of "the world" being to treat of a young widow's second marriage as certain and probably near and to smile with meaning if the widow acts accordingly. But if Dorothea did choose to espouse her solitude, he felt that the resolution would well become her.

CHAPTER 56

How happy is he born and taught
That serveth not another's will;
Whose armour is his honest thought,
And simple truth his only skill!
. . . . . .
This man is freed from servile bands
Of hope to rise, or fear to fall;
Lord of himself, though not of lands;
And having nothing, yet hath all.

—SIR HENRY WOTTON

Dorothea's confidence in Caleb Garth's knowledge, which had begun on her hearing that he approved of her cottages, had grown fast during her stay at Freshitt, Sir James having induced her to take rides over the two estates in company with himself and Caleb, who quite returned her admiration and told his wife that Mrs. Casaubon had a head for business most uncommon in a woman. It must be remembered that by "business" Caleb never meant money transactions, but the skilful application of labour.

"Most uncommon!" repeated Caleb. "She said a thing I often used to think myself when I was a lad—'Mr. Garth, I should like to feel, if I lived to be old, that I had improved a great piece of land and built a great many good cottages, because the work is of a healthy kind while it is being done, and after it is done, men are the better for it.' Those were the very words; she sees into things in that way."

"But womanly, I hope," said Mrs. Garth, half suspecting that Mrs. Casaubon might not hold the true principle of subordination.

"Oh, you can't think!" said Caleb, shaking his head. "You would like to hear her speak, Susan. She speaks in such plain words, and a voice like music. Bless me! It reminds me of bits in the *Messiah*—'and straightway there appeared a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying'; it has a tone with it that satisfies your ear."

Caleb was very fond of music, and when he could afford it went to hear an oratorio that came within his reach, returning from it with a profound reverence for this mighty structure of tones, which made him sit meditatively looking on the floor and throwing much unutterable language into his outstretched hands.

With this good understanding between them, it was natural that Dorothea asked Mr. Garth to undertake any business connected with the three farms and the numerous tenements attached to Lowick Manor; indeed, his expectation of getting work for two was being fast fulfilled. As he said, "Business breeds." And one form of business which was beginning to breed just then was the construction of railways. A projected line was to run through Lowick parish, where the cattle had hitherto grazed in a peace unbroken by astonishment; and thus it happened that the infant struggles of the railway system entered into the affairs of Caleb Garth and determined the course of this history with regard to two persons who were dear to him.

The submarine railway may have its difficulties, but the bed of the sea is not divided among various landed proprietors with claims for damages not only measurable but sentimental. In the hundred to which Middlemarch belonged, railways were as exciting a topic as the reform bill or the imminent horrors of cholera, and those who held the most decided views on the subject were women and landholders. Women both old and young regarded travelling by steam as presumptuous and dangerous and argued against it by saying that nothing should induce them to get into a railway carriage; while proprietors, differing from each other in their arguments as much as Mr. Solomon Featherstone differed from Lord Medlicote, were yet unanimous in the opinion that in selling land, whether to the enemy of mankind or to a company obliged to purchase, these pernicious agencies must be made to pay a very high price to landowners for permission to injure mankind.

But the slower wits, such as Mr. Solomon and Mrs. Waule, who both occupied land of their own, took a long time to arrive at this conclusion, their minds halting at the vivid conception of what it would be to cut the Big Pasture in two, and turn it into three-cornered bits, which would be "nohow," while accommodation-bridges and high payments were remote and incredible.

"The cows will all cast their calves, Brother," said Mrs. Waule in a tone of deep melancholy, "if the railway comes across the Near Close; and I shouldn't wonder at the mare too, if she was in foal. It's a poor tale if a widow's property is to be spaded away, and the law say nothing to it. What's to hinder 'em from cutting right and left if they begin? It's well known, *I* can't fight."

"The best way would be to say nothing, and set somebody on to send 'em away with a flea in their ear when they came spying and measuring," said Solomon. "Folks did that about Brassing, by what I can understand. It's all a pretence, if the truth was known, about their being forced to take one way. Let 'em go cutting in another parish. And I don't believe in any pay to make amends for bringing a lot of ruffians to trample your crops. Where's a company's pocket?"

"Brother Peter, God forgive him, got money out of a company," said Mrs. Waule. "But that was for the manganese. That wasn't for railways to blow you to pieces right and left."

“Well, there’s this to be said, Jane,” Mr. Solomon concluded, lowering his voice in a cautious manner, “the more spokes we put in their wheel, the more they’ll pay us to let ’em go on, if they must come whether or not.”

This reasoning of Mr. Solomon’s was perhaps less thorough than he imagined, his cunning bearing about the same relation to the course of railways as the cunning of a diplomatist bears to the general chill or catarrh of the solar system. But he set about acting on his views in a thoroughly diplomatic manner by stimulating suspicion. His side of Lowick was the most remote from the village, and the houses of the labouring people were either lone cottages or were collected in a hamlet called Frick, where a water-mill and some stone-pits made a little centre of slow, heavy-shouldered industry.

In the absence of any precise idea as to what railways were, public opinion in Frick was against them, for the human mind in that grassy corner had not the proverbial tendency to admire the unknown, holding rather that it was likely to be against the poor man and that suspicion was the only wise attitude with regard to it. Even the rumour of reform had not yet excited any millennial expectations in Frick, there being no definite promise in it, as of gratuitous grains to fatten Hiram Ford’s pig, or of a publican at the “Weights and Scales” who would brew beer for nothing, or of an offer on the part of the three neighbouring farmers to raise wages during winter. And without distinct good of this kind in its promises, reform seemed on a footing with the bragging of pedlars, which was a hint for distrust to every knowing person. The men of Frick were not ill-fed and were less given to fanaticism than to a strong muscular suspicion; less inclined to believe that they were peculiarly cared for by heaven, than to regard heaven itself as rather disposed to take them in—a disposition observable in the weather.

Thus the mind of Frick was exactly of the sort for Mr. Solomon Featherstone to work upon, he having more plenteous ideas of the same order, with a suspicion of heaven and earth which was better fed and more entirely at leisure. Solomon was overseer of the roads at that time, and on his slow-paced cob often took his rounds by Frick to look at the workmen getting the stones there, pausing with a mysterious deliberation, which might have misled you into supposing that he had some other reason for staying than the mere want of impulse to move. After looking for a long while at any work that was going on, he would raise his eyes a little and look at the horizon; finally he would shake his bridle, touch his horse with the whip, and get it to move slowly onward. The hour-hand of a clock was quick by comparison with Mr. Solomon, who had an agreeable sense that he could afford to be slow. He was in the habit of pausing for a cautious, vaguely designing chat with every hedger or ditcher on his way and was especially willing to listen even to news which he had heard before, feeling himself at an advantage over all narrators in partially disbelieving them. One day, however, he got into a dialogue with Hiram Ford, a waggoner, in which he himself contributed information. He wished to know whether Hiram had seen fellows with staves and instruments spying about; they called themselves railroad people, but there was no telling what they were or what they meant to do. The least they pretended was that they were going to cut Lowick parish into sixes and sevens.

“Why, there’ll be no stirrin’ from one pla-ace to another,” said Hiram, thinking of his waggon and horses.

“Not a bit,” said Mr. Solomon. “And cutting up fine land such as this parish! Let ’em go into Tipton, say I. But there’s no knowing what there is at the bottom of it. Traffic is what they put for’ard, but it’s to do harm to the land and the poor man in the long run.”

“Why, they’re Lunnon chaps, I reckon,” said Hiram, who had a dim notion of London as a centre of hostility to the country.

“Ay, to be sure. And in some parts against Brassing, by what I’ve heard say, the folks fell on ’em when they were spying, and broke their peep-holes as they carry, and drove ’em away so as they knew better than come again.”

“It war good foon, I’d be bound,” said Hiram, whose fun was much restricted by circumstances.

“Well, I wouldn’t meddle with ’em myself,” said Solomon. “But some say this country’s seen its best days, and the sign is, as it’s being overrun with these fellows trampling right and left, and wanting to cut it up into railways; and all for the big traffic to swallow up the little, so as there shan’t be a team left on the land, nor a whip to crack.”

“I’ll crack *my* whip about their ear’n afore they bring it to that, though,” said Hiram, while Mr. Solomon, shaking his bridle, moved onward.

Nettle-seed needs no digging. The ruin of this countryside by railroads was discussed, not only at the “Weight and Scales,” but in the hayfield, where the muster of working hands gave opportunities for talk such as were rarely had through the rural year.

One morning, not long after that interview between Mr. Farebrother and Mary Garth, in which she confessed to him her feeling for Fred Vincy, it happened that her father had some business which took him to Yoddrell’s farm in the direction of Frick: it was to measure and value an outlying piece of land belonging to Lowick Manor, which Caleb expected to dispose of advantageously for Dorothea (it must be confessed that his bias was towards getting the best possible terms from railroad companies). He put up his gig at Yoddrell’s, and in walking with his assistant and measuring-chain to the scene of his work, he encountered the party of the company’s agents, who were adjusting their spirit-level. After a little chat he left them, observing that by and by they would reach him again where he was going to measure. It was one of those grey mornings after light rains which become delicious about twelve o’clock, when the clouds part a little and the scent of the earth is sweet along the lanes and by the hedgerows.

The scent would have been sweeter to Fred Vincy, who was coming along the lanes on horseback, if his mind had not been worried by unsuccessful efforts to imagine what he was to do, with his father on one side expecting him straightway to enter the Church, with Mary on the other threatening to forsake him if he did enter it, and with the working-day world showing no eager need whatever of a young gentleman without capital and generally unskilled. It was the harder to Fred’s disposition because his father, satisfied that he was no longer rebellious, was in good humour with him and had sent him on this pleasant ride to see after some greyhounds. Even when he had fixed on what he should do, there would be the task of telling his father. But it must be admitted that the fixing, which had to come first, was the more difficult task—what secular avocation on earth was there for a young man (whose friends could not get him an “appointment”) which was at once gentlemanly, lucrative, and to be followed without special knowledge? Riding along the lanes by Frick in this mood, and slackening his pace while he reflected whether he should venture to go round by Lowick parsonage to call on Mary, he

could see over the hedges from one field to another. Suddenly a noise roused his attention, and on the far side of a field on his left hand he could see six or seven men in smock-frocks with hay-forks in their hands making an offensive approach towards the four railway agents who were facing them, while Caleb Garth and his assistant were hastening across the field to join the threatened group. Fred, delayed a few moments by having to find the gate, could not gallop up to the spot before the party in smock-frocks, whose work of turning the hay had not been too pressing after swallowing their mid-day beer, were driving the men in coats before them with their hay-forks; while Caleb Garth's assistant, a lad of seventeen, who had snatched up the spirit-level at Caleb's order, had been knocked down and seemed to be lying helpless. The coated men had the advantage as runners, and Fred covered their retreat by getting in front of the smock-frocks and charging them suddenly enough to throw their chase into confusion. "What do you confounded fools mean?" shouted Fred, pursuing the divided group in a zigzag and cutting right and left with his whip. "I'll swear to every one of you before the magistrate. You've knocked the lad down and killed him, for what I know. You'll every one of you be hanged at the next assizes, if you don't mind," said Fred, who afterwards laughed heartily as he remembered his own phrases.

The labourers had been driven through the gateway into their hayfield and Fred had checked his horse when Hiram Ford, observing himself at a safe challenging distance, turned back and shouted a defiance which he did not know to be Homeric.

"Yo're a coward, yo are. Yo git off your horse, young measter, and I'll have a round wi' ye, I wull. Yo daredn't come on wi'out your hoss an whip. I'd soon knock the breath out on ye, I would."

"Wait a minute, and I'll come back presently and have a round with you all in turn, if you like," said Fred, who felt confidence in his power of boxing with his dearly beloved brethren. But just now he wanted to hasten back to Caleb and the prostrate youth.

The lad's ankle was strained, and he was in much pain from it, but he was no further hurt, and Fred placed him on the horse that he might ride to Yoddrell's and be taken care of there.

"Let them put the horse in the stable, and tell the surveyors they can come back for their traps," said Fred. "The ground is clear now."

"No, no," said Caleb, "here's a breakage. They'll have to give up for today, and it will be as well. Here, take the things before you on the horse, Tom. They'll see you coming, and they'll turn back."

"I'm glad I happened to be here at the right moment, Mr. Garth," said Fred as Tom rode away. "No knowing what might have happened if the cavalry had not come up in time."

"Ay, ay, it was lucky," said Caleb, speaking rather absently and looking towards the spot where he had been at work at the moment of interruption. "But—deuce take it—this is what comes of men being fools; I'm hindered of my day's work. I can't get along without somebody to help me with the measuring-chain. However!" He was beginning to move towards the spot with a look of vexation, as if he had forgotten Fred's presence, but suddenly he turned round and said quickly, "What have you got to do today, young fellow?"

"Nothing, Mr. Garth. I'll help you with pleasure—can I?" said Fred with a sense that he should be courting Mary when he was helping her father.

"Well, you mustn't mind stooping and getting hot."

"I don't mind anything. Only I want to go first and have a round with that bulky fellow who turned to challenge me. It would be a good lesson for him. I shall not be five minutes."

"Nonsense!" said Caleb with his most peremptory intonation. "I shall go and speak to the men myself. It's all ignorance. Somebody has been telling them lies. The poor fools don't know any better."

"I shall go with you, then," said Fred.

"No, no; stay where you are. I don't want your young blood. I can take care of myself."

Caleb was a powerful man and knew little of any fear except the fear of hurting others and the fear of having to speechify. But he felt it his duty at this moment to try and give a little harangue. There was a striking mixture in him—which came from his having always been a hard-working man himself—of rigorous notions about workmen and practical indulgence towards them. To do a good day's work and do it well he held to be part of their welfare, as it was the chief part of his own happiness; but he had a strong sense of fellowship with them. When he advanced towards the labourers they had not gone to work again, but were standing in that form of rural grouping which consists in each turning a shoulder towards the other, at a distance of two or three yards. They looked rather sulkily at Caleb, who walked quickly with one hand in his pocket and the other thrust between the buttons of his waistcoat and had his everyday mild air when he paused among them.

"Why, my lads, how's this?" he began, taking as usual to brief phrases, which seemed pregnant to himself because he had many thoughts lying under them, like the abundant roots of a plant that just manages to peep above the water. "How came you to make such a mistake as this? Somebody has been telling you lies. You thought those men up there wanted to do mischief."

"Aw!" was the answer, dropped at intervals by each according to his degree of unreadiness.

"Nonsense! No such thing! They're looking out to see which way the railroad is to take. Now, my lads, you can't hinder the railroad; it will be made whether you like it or not. And if you go fighting against it, you'll get yourselves into trouble. The law gives those men leave to come here on the land. The owner has nothing to say against it, and if you meddle with them you'll have to do with the constable and Justice Blakesley, and with the handcuffs and Middlemarch jail. And you might be in for it now if anybody informed against you."

Caleb paused here, and perhaps the greater orator could not have chosen either his pause or his images better for the occasion.

"But come, you didn't mean any harm. Somebody told you the railroad was a bad thing. That was a lie. It may do a bit of harm here and there, to this and to that; and so does the sun in heaven. But the railway's a good thing."

"Aw! Good for the big folks to make money out on," said old Timothy Cooper, who had stayed behind turning his hay while the others had been gone on their spree; "I'n seen lots o' things turn up sin' I war a young un—the war an' the peace,

and the canells, an' the oald King George, an' the regen', an' the new King George, an' the new un as has got a new ne-ame—an' it's been all aloike to the poor mon. What's the canells been t' him? They 'n brought him neyther me-at nor be-acon, nor wage to lay by, if he didn't save it wi' clemmin' his own inside. Times ha' got wusser for him sin' I war a young un. An' so it'll be wi' the railroads. They'll on'y leave the poor mon furder behind. But them are fools as meddle, and so I told the chaps here. This is the big folks's world, this is. But yo're for the big folks, Muster Garth, yo are."

Timothy was a wiry old labourer, of a type lingering in those times—who had his savings in a stocking-foot, lived in a lone cottage, and was not to be wrought on by any oratory, having as little of the feudal spirit, and believing as little, as if he had not been totally unacquainted with the Age of Reason and the Rights of Man. Caleb was in a difficulty known to any person attempting in dark times and unassisted by miracle to reason with rustics who are in possession of an undeniable truth which they know through a hard process of feeling, and can let it fall like a giant's club on your neatly carved argument for a social benefit which they do *not* feel.

Caleb had no cant at command, even if he could have chosen to use it; and he had been accustomed to meet all such difficulties in no other way than by doing his "business" faithfully. He answered, "If you don't think well of me, Tim, never mind; that's neither here nor there now. Things may be bad for the poor man—bad they are; but I want the lads here not to do what will make things worse for themselves. The cattle may have a heavy load, but it won't help 'em to throw it over into the roadside pit, when it's partly their own fodder."

"We war on'y for a bit o' foon," said Hiram, who was beginning to see consequences. "That war all we war arter."

"Well, promise me not to meddle again, and I'll see that nobody informs against you."

"I'n ne'er meddled, an' I'n no call to promise," said Timothy.

"No, but the rest. Come, I'm as hard at work as any of you today, and I can't spare much time. Say you'll be quiet without the constable."

"Aw, we wooant meddle; they may do as they loike for oos" were the forms in which Caleb got his pledges; and then he hastened back to Fred, who had followed him and watched him in the gateway.

They went to work, and Fred helped vigorously. His spirits had risen, and he heartily enjoyed a good slip in the moist earth under the hedgerow, which soiled his perfect summer trousers. Was it his successful onset which had elated him or the satisfaction of helping Mary's father? Something more. The accidents of the morning had helped his frustrated imagination to shape an employment for himself which had several attractions. I am not sure that certain fibres in Mr. Garth's mind had not resumed their old vibration towards the very end which now revealed itself to Fred. For the effective accident is but the touch of fire where there is oil and tow; and it always appeared to Fred that the railway brought the needed touch. But they went on in silence except when their business demanded speech. At last, when they had finished and were walking away, Mr. Garth said, "A young fellow needn't be a B.A. to do this sort of work, eh, Fred?"

"I wish I had taken to it before I had thought of being a B.A.," said Fred. He paused a moment, and then added more hesitatingly, "Do you think I am too old to learn your business, Mr. Garth?"

"My business is of many sorts, my boy," said Mr. Garth, smiling. "A good deal of what I know can only come from experience; you can't learn it off as you learn things out of a book. But you are young enough to lay a foundation yet." Caleb pronounced the last sentence emphatically, but paused in some uncertainty. He had been under the impression lately that Fred had made up his mind to enter the Church.

"You do think I could do some good at it if I were to try?" said Fred more eagerly.

"That depends," said Caleb, turning his head on one side and lowering his voice with the air of a man who felt himself to be saying something deeply religious. "You must be sure of two things: you must love your work, and not be always looking over the edge of it, wanting your play to begin. And the other is, you must not be ashamed of your work and think it would be more honourable to you to be doing something else. You must have a pride in your own work and in learning to do it well, and not be always saying there's this and there's that—if I had this or that to do, I might make something of it. No matter what a man is, I wouldn't give twopence for him"—here Caleb's mouth looked bitter, and he snapped his fingers—"whether he was the prime minister or the rick-thatcher if he didn't do well what he undertook to do."

"I can never feel that I should do that in being a clergyman," said Fred, meaning to take a step in argument.

"Then let it alone, my boy," said Caleb abruptly, "else you'll never be easy. Or, if you *are* easy, you'll be a poor stick."

"That is very nearly what Mary thinks about it," said Fred, colouring. "I think you must know what I feel for Mary, Mr. Garth; I hope it does not displease you that I have always loved her better than anyone else and that I shall never love anyone as I love her."

The expression of Caleb's face was visibly softening while Fred spoke. But he swung his head with a solemn slowness and said, "That makes things more serious, Fred, if you want to take Mary's happiness into your keeping."

"I know that, Mr. Garth," said Fred eagerly, "and I would do anything for *her*. She says she will never have me if I go into the Church, and I shall be the most miserable devil in the world if I lose all hope of Mary. Really, if I could get some other profession, business, anything that I am at all fit for, I would work hard, I would deserve your good opinion. I should like to have to do with outdoor things. I know a good deal about land and cattle already. I used to believe, you know—though you will think me rather foolish for it—that I should have land of my own. I am sure knowledge of that sort would come easily to me, especially if I could be under you in any way."

"Softly, my boy," said Caleb, having the image of "Susan" before his eyes. "What have you said to your father about all this?"

"Nothing, yet; but I must tell him. I am only waiting to know what I can do instead of entering the Church. I am very sorry to disappoint him, but a man ought to be allowed to judge for himself when he is four-and-twenty. How could I know when I was fifteen what it would be right for me to do now? My education was a mistake."

"But hearken to this, Fred," said Caleb. "Are you sure Mary is fond of you, or would ever have you?"

"I asked Mr. Farebrother to talk to her because she had forbidden me—I didn't know what else to do," said Fred apologetically. "And he says that I have every reason to hope, if I can put myself in an honourable position—I mean, out of the Church. I dare say you think it unwarrantable in me, Mr. Garth, to be troubling you and obtruding my own wishes

about Mary before I have done anything at all for myself. Of course I have not the least claim; indeed, I have already a debt to you which will never be discharged, even when I have been able to pay it in the shape of money."

"Yes, my boy, you have a claim," said Caleb with much feeling in his voice. "The young ones have always a claim on the old to help them forward. I was young myself once and had to do without much help; but help would have been welcome to me, if it had been only for the fellow-feeling's sake. But I must consider. Come to me tomorrow at the office, at nine o'clock. At the office, mind."

Mr. Garth would take no important step without consulting Susan, but it must be confessed that before he reached home he had taken his resolution. With regard to a large number of matters about which other men are decided or obstinate, he was the most easily manageable man in the world. He never knew what meat he would choose, and if Susan had said that they ought to live in a four-roomed cottage in order to save, he would have said, "Let us go," without inquiring into details. But where Caleb's feeling and judgement strongly pronounced, he was a ruler; and in spite of his mildness and timidity in reproving, everyone about him knew that on the exceptional occasions when he chose, he was absolute. He never, indeed, chose to be absolute except on someone else's behalf. On ninety-nine points Mrs. Garth decided, but on the hundredth she was often aware that she would have to perform the singularly difficult task of carrying out her own principle, and to make herself subordinate.

"It is come round as I thought, Susan," said Caleb when they were seated alone in the evening. He had already narrated the adventure which had brought about Fred's sharing in his work, but had kept back the further result. "The children *are* fond of each other—I mean Fred and Mary."

Mrs. Garth laid her work on her knee and fixed her penetrating eyes anxiously on her husband.

"After we'd done our work, Fred poured it all out to me. He can't bear to be a clergyman, and Mary says she won't have him if he is one; and the lad would like to be under me and give his mind to business. And I've determined to take him and make a man of him."

"Caleb!" said Mrs. Garth in a deep contralto, expressive of resigned astonishment.

"It's a fine thing to do," said Mr. Garth, settling himself firmly against the back of his chair and grasping the elbows. "I shall have trouble with him, but I think I shall carry it through. The lad loves Mary, and a true love for a good woman is a great thing, Susan. It shapes many a rough fellow."

"Has Mary spoken to you on the subject?" said Mrs. Garth, secretly a little hurt that she had to be informed on it herself.

"Not a word. I asked her about Fred once; I gave her a bit of a warning. But she assured me she would never marry an idle, self-indulgent man—nothing since. But it seems Fred set on Mr. Farebrother to talk to her, because she had forbidden him to speak himself, and Mr. Farebrother has found out that she is fond of Fred but says he must not be a clergyman. Fred's heart is fixed on Mary, that I can see; it gives me a good opinion of the lad—and we always liked him, Susan."

"It is a pity for Mary, I think," said Mrs. Garth.

"Why—a pity?"

"Because, Caleb, she might have had a man who is worth twenty Fred Vincys."

"Ah?" said Caleb with surprise.

"I firmly believe that Mr. Farebrother is attached to her and meant to make her an offer; but of course, now that Fred has used him as an envoy, there is an end to that better prospect." There was a severe precision in Mrs. Garth's utterance. She was vexed and disappointed, but she was bent on abstaining from useless words.

Caleb was silent a few moments under a conflict of feelings. He looked at the floor and moved his head and hands in accompaniment to some inward argumentation. At last he said, "That would have made me very proud and happy, Susan, and I should have been glad for your sake. I've always felt that your belongings have never been on a level with you. But you took me, though I was a plain man."

"I took the best and cleverest man I had ever known," said Mrs. Garth, convinced that *she* would never have loved anyone who came short of that mark.

"Well, perhaps others thought you might have done better. But it would have been worse for me. And that is what touches me close about Fred. The lad is good at bottom, and clever enough to do, if he's put in the right way; and he loves and honours my daughter beyond anything, and she has given him a sort of promise according to what he turns out. I say, that young man's soul is in my hand; and I'll do the best I can for him, so help me God! It's my duty, Susan."

Mrs. Garth was not given to tears, but there was a large one rolling down her face before her husband had finished. It came from the pressure of various feelings, in which there was much affection and some vexation. She wiped it away quickly, saying, "Few men besides you would think it a duty to add to their anxieties in that way, Caleb."

"That signifies nothing—what other men would think. I've got a clear feeling inside me, and that I shall follow; and I hope your heart will go with me, Susan, in making everything as light as can be to Mary, poor child."

Caleb, leaning back in his chair, looked with anxious appeal towards his wife. She rose and kissed him, saying, "God bless you, Caleb! Our children have a good father."

But she went out and had a hearty cry to make up for the suppression of her words. She felt sure that her husband's conduct would be misunderstood, and about Fred she was rational and unhopeful. Which would turn out to have the more foresight in it—her rationality or Caleb's ardent generosity?

When Fred went to the office the next morning, there was a test to be gone through which he was not prepared for.

"Now, Fred," said Caleb, "you will have some desk-work. I have always done a good deal of writing myself, but I can't do without help, and as I want you to understand the accounts and get the values into your head, I mean to do without another clerk. So you must buckle to. How are you at writing and arithmetic?"

Fred felt an awkward movement of the heart; he had not thought of desk-work, but he was in a resolute mood and not going to shrink. "I'm not afraid of arithmetic, Mr. Garth; it always came easily to me. I think you know my writing."

"Let us see," said Caleb, taking up a pen, examining it carefully, and handing it, well dipped, to Fred with a sheet of ruled paper. "Copy me a line or two of that valuation, with the figures at the end."

At that time the opinion existed that it was beneath a gentleman to write legibly or with a hand in the least suitable to a

clerk. Fred wrote the lines demanded in a hand as gentlemanly as that of any viscount or bishop of the day: the vowels were all alike, and the consonants only distinguishable as turning up or down; the strokes had a blotted solidity, and the letters disdained to keep the line—in short, it was a manuscript of that venerable kind easy to interpret when you know beforehand what the writer means.

As Caleb looked on his visage showed a growing depression, but when Fred handed him the paper he gave something like a snarl and rapped the paper passionately with the back of his hand. Bad work like this dispelled all Caleb's mildness.

"The deuce!" he exclaimed snarlingly. "To think that this is a country where a man's education may cost hundreds and hundreds, and it turns you out this!" Then in a more pathetic tone, pushing up his spectacles and looking at the unfortunate scribe, "The Lord have mercy on us, Fred; I can't put up with this!"

"What can I do, Mr. Garth?" said Fred, whose spirits had sunk very low, not only at the estimate of his handwriting, but at the vision of himself as liable to be ranked with office-clerks.

"Do? Why, you must learn to form your letters and keep the line. What's the use of writing at all if nobody can understand it?" asked Caleb energetically, quite preoccupied with the bad quality of the work. "Is there so little business in the world that you must be sending puzzles over the country? But that's the way people are brought up. I should lose no end of time with the letters some people send me if Susan did not make them out for me. It's disgusting." Here Caleb tossed the paper from him.

Any stranger peeping into the office at that moment might have wondered what was the drama between the indignant man of business and the fine-looking young fellow whose blond complexion was getting rather patchy as he bit his lip with mortification. Fred was struggling with many thoughts. Mr. Garth had been so kind and encouraging at the beginning of their interview that gratitude and hopefulness had been at a high pitch, and the downfall was proportionate. He had not thought of desk-work—in fact, like the majority of young gentlemen, he wanted an occupation which would be free from disagreeables. I cannot tell what might have been the consequences if he had not distinctly promised himself that he would go to Lowick to see Mary and tell her that he was engaged to work under her father. He did not like to disappoint himself there.

"I am very sorry," were all the words that he could muster. But Mr. Garth was already relenting.

"We must make the best of it, Fred," he began with a return to his usual quiet tone. "Every man can learn to write. I taught myself. Go at it with a will, and sit up at night if the daytime isn't enough. We'll be patient, my boy. Callum shall go on with the books for a bit while you are learning. But now I must be off," said Caleb, rising. "You must let your father know our agreement. You'll save me Callum's salary, you know, when you can write; and I can afford to give you eighty pounds for the first year, and more after."

When Fred made the necessary disclosure to his parents, the relative effect on the two was a surprise which entered very deeply into his memory. He went straight from Mr. Garth's office to the warehouse, rightly feeling that the most respectful way in which he could behave to his father was to make the painful communication as gravely and formally as possible. Moreover, the decision would be more certainly understood to be final if the interview took place in his father's gravest hours, which were always those spent in his private room at the warehouse.

Fred entered on the subject directly and declared briefly what he had done and was resolved to do, expressing at the end his regret that he should be the cause of disappointment to his father and taking the blame on his own deficiencies. The regret was genuine and inspired Fred with strong, simple words.

Mr. Vincy listened in profound surprise without uttering even an exclamation, a silence which in his impatient temperament was a sign of unusual emotion. He had not been in good spirits about trade that morning, and the slight bitterness in his lips grew intense as he listened. When Fred had ended, there was a pause of nearly a minute, during which Mr. Vincy replaced a book in his desk and turned the key emphatically. Then he looked at his son steadily and said, "So you've made up your mind at last, sir?"

"Yes, Father."

"Very well; stick to it. I've no more to say. You've thrown away your education and gone down a step in life when I had given you the means of rising, that's all."

"I am very sorry that we differ, Father. I think I can be quite as much of a gentleman at the work I have undertaken as if I had been a curate. But I am grateful to you for wishing to do the best for me."

"Very well; I have no more to say. I wash my hands of you. I only hope when you have a son of your own he will make a better return for the pains you spend on him."

This was very cutting to Fred. His father was using that unfair advantage possessed by us all when we are in a pathetic situation and see our own past as if it were simply part of the pathos. In reality, Mr. Vincy's wishes about his son had had a great deal of pride, inconsiderateness, and egoistic folly in them. But still the disappointed father held a strong lever, and Fred felt as if he were being banished with a malediction.

"I hope you will not object to my remaining at home, sir?" he said after rising to go; "I shall have a sufficient salary to pay for my board, as of course I should wish to do."

"Board be hanged!" said Mr. Vincy, recovering himself in his disgust at the notion that Fred's keep would be missed at his table. "Of course your mother will want you to stay. But I shall keep no horse for you, you understand; and you will pay your own tailor. You will do with a suit or two less, I fancy, when you have to pay for 'em."

Fred lingered; there was still something to be said. At last it came.

"I hope you will shake hands with me, Father, and forgive me the vexation I have caused you."

Mr. Vincy from his chair threw a quick glance upward at his son, who had advanced near to him, and then gave his hand, saying hurriedly, "Yes, yes, let us say no more."

Fred went through much more narrative and explanation with his mother, but she was inconsolable, having before her eyes what perhaps her husband had never thought of, the certainty that Fred would marry Mary Garth, that her life would henceforth be spoiled by a perpetual infusion of Garths and their ways, and that her darling boy, with his beautiful face and stylish air "beyond anybody else's son in Middlemarch," would be sure to get like that family in plainness of

appearance and carelessness about his clothes. To her it seemed that there was a Garth conspiracy to get possession of the desirable Fred, but she dared not enlarge on this opinion because a slight hint of it had made him “fly out” at her as he had never done before. Her temper was too sweet for her to show any anger, but she felt that her happiness had received a bruise, and for several days merely to look at Fred made her cry a little as if he were the subject of some baleful prophecy. Perhaps she was the slower to recover her usual cheerfulness because Fred had warned her that she must not reopen the sore question with his father, who had accepted his decision and forgiven him. If her husband had been vehement against Fred, she would have been urged into defence of her darling.

It was the end of the fourth day when Mr. Vincy said to her, “Come, Lucy, my dear, don’t be so down-hearted. You always have spoiled the boy, and you must go on spoiling him.”

“Nothing ever did cut me so before, Vincy,” said the wife, her fair throat and chin beginning to tremble again; “only his illness.”

“Pooh, pooh, never mind! We must expect to have trouble with our children. Don’t make it worse by letting me see you out of spirits.”

“Well, I won’t,” said Mrs. Vincy, roused by this appeal and adjusting herself with a little shake as of a bird which lays down its ruffled plumage.

“It won’t do to begin making a fuss about one,” said Mr. Vincy, wishing to combine a little grumbling with domestic cheerfulness. “There’s Rosamond as well as Fred.”

“Yes, poor thing. I’m sure I felt for her being disappointed of her baby, but she got over it nicely.”

“Baby, pooh! I can see Lydgate is making a mess of his practice, and getting into debt too by what I hear. I shall have Rosamond coming to me with a pretty tale one of these days. But they’ll get no money from me, I know. Let *his* family help him. I never did like that marriage. But it’s no use talking. Ring the bell for lemons, and don’t look dull any more, Lucy. I’ll drive you and Louisa to Riverston tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 57

They numbered scarce eight summers when a name
Rose on their souls and stirred such motions there
As thrill the buds and shape their hidden frame
At penetration of the quickening air:
His name who told of loyal Evan Dhu,
Of quaint Bradwardine, and Vich Ian Vor,
Making the little world their childhood knew
Large with a land of mountain, lake, and scaur,
And larger yet with wonder, love, belief
Toward Walter Scott, who living far away
Sent them this wealth of joy and noble grief.
The book and they must part, but day by day,
In lines that thwart like portly spiders ran,
They wrote the tale, from Tully Veolan.

The evening that Fred Vincy walked to Lowick parsonage (he had begun to see that this was a world in which even a spirited young man must sometimes walk for want of a horse to carry him), he set out at five o'clock and called on Mrs. Garth by the way, wishing to assure himself that she accepted their new relations willingly.

He found the family group, dogs and cats included, under the great apple-tree in the orchard. It was a festival with Mrs. Garth, for her eldest son, Christy, her peculiar joy and pride, had come home for a short holiday—Christy, who held it the most desirable thing in the world to be a tutor, to study all literatures and be a regenerate Porson, and who was an incorporate criticism on poor Fred, a sort of object-lesson given to him by the educational mother. Christy himself, a square-browed, broad-shouldered, masculine edition of his mother, not much higher than Fred's shoulder—which made it the harder that he should be held superior—was always as simple as possible and thought no more of Fred's disinclination to scholarship than of a giraffe's, wishing that he himself were more of the same height. He was lying on the ground now by his mother's chair, with his straw-hat laid flat over his eyes, while Jim on the other side was reading aloud from that beloved writer who has made a chief part in the happiness of many young lives. The volume was *Ivanhoe*, and Jim was in the great archery scene at the tournament, but suffered much interruption from Ben, who had fetched his own old bow and arrows and was making himself dreadfully disagreeable, Letty thought, by begging all present to observe his random shots, which no one wished to do except Brownie, the active-minded but probably shallow mongrel, while the grizzled Newfoundland lying in the sun looked on with the dull-eyed neutrality of extreme old age. Letty herself, showing as to her mouth and pinafore some slight signs that she had been assisting at the gathering of the cherries which stood in a coral-heap on the tea-table, was now seated on the grass listening open-eyed to the reading.

But the centre of interest was changed for all by the arrival of Fred Vincy. When, seating himself on a garden-stool, he said that he was on his way to Lowick parsonage, Ben, who had thrown down his bow and snatched up a reluctant half-grown kitten instead, strode across Fred's outstretched leg and said, "Take me!"

"Oh, and me too," said Letty.

"You can't keep up with Fred and me," said Ben.

"Yes, I can. Mother, please say that I am to go," urged Letty, whose life was much checkered by resistance to her depreciation as a girl.

"*I* shall stay with Christy," observed Jim, as much as to say that he had the advantage of those simpletons; whereupon Letty put her hand up to her head and looked with jealous indecision from the one to the other.

"Let us all go and see Mary," said Christy, opening his arms.

"No, my dear child, we must not go in a swarm to the parsonage. And that old Glasgow suit of yours would never do. Besides, your father will come home. We must let Fred go alone. He can tell Mary that you are here, and she will come back tomorrow."

Christy glanced at his own threadbare knees and then at Fred's beautiful white trousers. Certainly Fred's tailoring suggested the advantages of an English university, and he had a graceful way even of looking warm and of pushing his hair back with his handkerchief.

"Children, run away," said Mrs. Garth; "it is too warm to hang about your friends. Take your brother and show him the rabbits."

The eldest understood and led off the children immediately. Fred felt that Mrs. Garth wished to give him an opportunity of saying anything he had to say, but he could only begin by observing, "How glad you must be to have Christy here!"

"Yes; he has come sooner than I expected. He got down from the coach at nine o'clock, just after his father went out. I am longing for Caleb to come and hear what wonderful progress Christy is making. He has paid his expenses for the last year by giving lessons, carrying on hard study at the same time. He hopes soon to get a private tutorship and go abroad."

"He is a great fellow," said Fred, to whom these cheerful truths had a medicinal taste, "and no trouble to anybody." After a slight pause, he added, "But I fear you will think that I am going to be a great deal of trouble to Mr. Garth."

"Caleb likes taking trouble; he is one of those men who always do more than anyone would have thought of asking them

to do," answered Mrs. Garth. She was knitting and could either look at Fred or not as she chose—always an advantage when one is bent on loading speech with salutary meaning; and though Mrs. Garth intended to be duly reserved, she did wish to say something that Fred might be the better for.

"I know you think me very undeserving, Mrs. Garth, and with good reason," said Fred, his spirit rising a little at the perception of something like a disposition to lecture him. "I happen to have behaved just the worst to the people I can't help wishing for the most from. But while two men like Mr. Garth and Mr. Farebrother have not given me up, I don't see why I should give myself up." Fred thought it might be well to suggest these masculine examples to Mrs. Garth.

"Assuredly," said she with gathering emphasis. "A young man for whom two such elders had devoted themselves would indeed be culpable if he threw himself away and made their sacrifices vain."

Fred wondered a little at this strong language, but only said, "I hope it will not be so with me, Mrs. Garth, since I have some encouragement to believe that I may win Mary. Mr. Garth has told you about that? You were not surprised, I dare say?" Fred ended, innocently referring only to his own love as probably evident enough.

"Not surprised that Mary has given you encouragement?" returned Mrs. Garth, who thought it would be well for Fred to be more alive to the fact that Mary's friends could not possibly have wished this beforehand, whatever the Vincys might suppose. "Yes, I confess I *was* surprised."

"She never did give me any—not the least in the world when I talked to her myself," said Fred, eager to vindicate Mary. "But when I asked Mr. Farebrother to speak for me, she allowed him to tell me there was a hope."

The power of admonition which had begun to stir in Mrs. Garth had not yet discharged itself. It was a little too provoking even for *her* self-control that this blooming youngster should flourish on the disappointments of sadder and wiser people—making a meal of a nightingale and never knowing it—and that all the while his family should suppose that hers was in eager need of this sprig; and her vexation had fermented the more actively because of its total repression towards her husband. Exemplary wives will sometimes find scapegoats in this way. She now said with energetic decision, "You made a great mistake, Fred, in asking Mr. Farebrother to speak for you."

"Did I?" said Fred, reddening instantaneously. He was alarmed, but at a loss to know what Mrs. Garth meant, and added in an apologetic tone, "Mr. Farebrother has always been such a friend of ours; and Mary, I knew, would listen to him gravely; and he took it on himself quite readily."

"Yes, young people are usually blind to everything but their own wishes, and seldom imagine how much those wishes cost others," said Mrs. Garth. She did not mean to go beyond this salutary general doctrine and threw her indignation into a needless unwinding of her worsted, knitting her brow at it with a grand air.

"I cannot conceive how it could be any pain to Mr. Farebrother," said Fred, who nevertheless felt that surprising conceptions were beginning to form themselves.

"Precisely; you cannot conceive," said Mrs. Garth, cutting her words as neatly as possible.

For a moment Fred looked at the horizon with a dismayed anxiety, and then turning with a quick movement said almost sharply, "Do you mean to say, Mrs. Garth, that Mr. Farebrother is in love with Mary?"

"And if it were so, Fred, I think you are the last person who ought to be surprised," returned Mrs. Garth, laying her knitting down beside her and folding her arms. It was an unwonted sign of emotion in her that she should put her work out of her hands. In fact her feelings were divided between the satisfaction of giving Fred his discipline and the sense of having gone a little too far. Fred took his hat and stick and rose quickly.

"Then you think I am standing in his way, and in Mary's too?" he said in a tone which seemed to demand an answer.

Mrs. Garth could not speak immediately. She had brought herself into the unpleasant position of being called on to say what she really felt, yet what she knew there were strong reasons for concealing. And to her the consciousness of having exceeded in words was peculiarly mortifying. Besides, Fred had given out unexpected electricity, and he now added, "Mr. Garth seemed pleased that Mary should be attached to me. He could not have known anything of this."

Mrs. Garth felt a severe twinge at this mention of her husband, the fear that Caleb might think her in the wrong not being easily endurable. She answered, wanting to check unintended consequences, "I spoke from inference only. I am not aware that Mary knows anything of the matter."

But she hesitated to beg that he would keep entire silence on a subject which she had herself unnecessarily mentioned, not being used to stoop in that way; and while she was hesitating there was already a rush of unintended consequences under the apple-tree where the tea-things stood. Ben, bouncing across the grass with Brownie at his heels, and seeing the kitten dragging the knitting by a lengthening line of wool, shouted and clapped his hands; Brownie barked, the kitten, desperate, jumped on the tea-table and upset the milk, then jumped down again and swept half the cherries with it; and Ben, snatching up the half-knitted sock-top, fitted it over the kitten's head as a new source of madness; while Letty, arriving, cried out to her mother against this cruelty—it was a history as full of sensation as "This is the house that Jack built." Mrs. Garth was obliged to interfere, the other young ones came up, and the *tête-à-tête* with Fred was ended. He got away as soon as he could, and Mrs. Garth could only imply some retraction of her severity by saying "God bless you" when she shook hands with him.

She was unpleasantly conscious that she had been on the verge of speaking out as "one of the foolish women speaketh"—telling first and entreating silence after. But she had not entreated silence, and to prevent Caleb's blame she determined to blame herself and confess all to him that very night. It was curious what an awful tribunal the mild Caleb's was to her whenever he set it up. But she meant to point out to him that the revelation might do Fred Vincy a great deal of good.

No doubt it was having a strong effect on him as he walked to Lowick. Fred's light, hopeful nature had perhaps never had so much of a bruise as from this suggestion that if he had been out of the way Mary might have made a thoroughly good match. Also he was piqued that he had been what he called such a stupid lout as to ask that intervention from Mr. Farebrother. But it was not in a lover's nature—it was not in Fred's—that the new anxiety raised about Mary's feeling should not surmount every other. Notwithstanding his trust in Mr. Farebrother's generosity, notwithstanding what Mary had said to him, Fred could not help feeling that he had a rival; it was a new consciousness, and he objected to it

extremely, not being in the least ready to give up Mary for her good, being ready rather to fight for her with any man whatsoever. But the fighting with Mr. Farebrother must be of a metaphorical kind, which was much more difficult to Fred than the muscular. Certainly this experience was a discipline for Fred hardly less sharp than his disappointment about his uncle's will. The iron had not entered into his soul, but he had begun to imagine what the sharp edge would be. It did not once occur to Fred that Mrs. Garth might be mistaken about Mr. Farebrother, but he suspected that she might be wrong about Mary. Mary had been staying at the parsonage lately, and her mother might know very little of what had been passing in her mind.

He did not feel easier when he found her looking cheerful with the three ladies in the drawing-room. They were in animated discussion on some subject which was dropped when he entered, and Mary was copying the labels from a heap of shallow cabinet drawers, in a minute handwriting which she was skilled in. Mr. Farebrother was somewhere in the village, and the three ladies knew nothing of Fred's peculiar relation to Mary; it was impossible for either of them to propose that they should walk round the garden, and Fred predicted to himself that he should have to go away without saying a word to her in private. He told her first of Christy's arrival and then of his own engagement with her father; and he was comforted by seeing that this latter news touched her keenly. She said hurriedly, "I am so glad," and then bent over her writing to hinder anyone from noticing her face. But here was a subject which Mrs. Farebrother could not let pass.

"You don't mean, my dear Miss Garth, that you are glad to hear of a young man giving up the Church, for which he was educated; you only mean that things being so, you are glad that he should be under an excellent man like your father."

"No, really, Mrs. Farebrother, I am glad of both, I fear," said Mary, cleverly getting rid of one rebellious tear. "I have a dreadfully secular mind. I never liked any clergyman except the vicar of Wakefield and Mr. Farebrother."

"Now why, my dear?" said Mrs. Farebrother, pausing on her large wooden knitting-needles and looking at Mary. "You have always a good reason for your opinions, but this astonishes me. Of course I put out of the question those who preach new doctrine. But why should you dislike clergymen?"

"Oh dear," said Mary, her face breaking into merriment as she seemed to consider a moment, "I don't like their neckcloths."

"Why, you don't like Camden's, then," said Miss Winifred in some anxiety.

"Yes, I do," said Mary. "I don't like the other clergymen's neckcloths, because it is they who wear them."

"How very puzzling!" said Miss Noble, feeling that her own intellect was probably deficient.

"My dear, you are joking. You would have better reasons than these for slighting so respectable a class of men," said Mrs. Farebrother majestically.

"Miss Garth has such severe notions of what people should be that it is difficult to satisfy her," said Fred.

"Well, I am glad at least that she makes an exception in favour of my son," said the old lady.

Mary was wondering at Fred's piqued tone when Mr. Farebrother came in and had to hear the news about the engagement under Mr. Garth. At the end he said with quiet satisfaction, "*That* is right," and then bent to look at Mary's labels and praise her handwriting. Fred felt horribly jealous—was glad, of course, that Mr. Farebrother was so estimable but wished that he had been ugly and fat as men at forty sometimes are. It was clear what the end would be, since Mary openly placed Farebrother above everybody, and these women were all evidently encouraging the affair. He was feeling sure that he should have no chance of speaking to Mary when Mr. Farebrother said, "Fred, help me to carry these drawers back into my study—you have never seen my fine new study. Pray come too, Miss Garth. I want you to see a stupendous spider I found this morning."

Mary at once saw the vicar's intention. He had never since the memorable evening deviated from his old pastoral kindness towards her, and her momentary wonder and doubt had quite gone to sleep. Mary was accustomed to think rather vigorously of what was probable, and if a belief flattered her vanity she felt warned to dismiss it as ridiculous, having early had much exercise in such dismissals. It was as she had foreseen; when Fred had been asked to admire the fittings of the study and she had been asked to admire the spider, Mr. Farebrother said, "Wait here a minute or two. I am going to look out an engraving which Fred is tall enough to hang for me. I shall be back in a few minutes."

And then he went out. Nevertheless, the first word Fred said to Mary was, "It is of no use, whatever I do, Mary. You are sure to marry Farebrother at last." There was some rage in his tone.

"What do you mean, Fred?" Mary exclaimed indignantly, blushing deeply and surprised out of all her readiness in reply.

"It is impossible that you should not see it all clearly enough—you who see everything."

"I only see that you are behaving very ill, Fred, in speaking so of Mr. Farebrother after he has pleaded your cause in every way. How can you have taken up such an idea?"

Fred was rather deep, in spite of his irritation. If Mary had really been unsuspicious, there was no good in telling her what Mrs. Garth had said.

"It follows as a matter of course," he replied. "When you are continually seeing a man who beats me in everything and whom you set up above everybody, I can have no fair chance."

"You are very ungrateful, Fred," said Mary. "I wish I had never told Mr. Farebrother that I cared for you in the least."

"No, I am not ungrateful; I should be the happiest fellow in the world if it were not for this. I told your father everything, and he was very kind; he treated me as if I were his son. I could go at the work with a will, writing and everything, if it were not for this."

"For this? For what?" said Mary, imagining now that something specific must have been said or done.

"This dreadful certainty that I shall be bowled out by Farebrother." Mary was appeased by her inclination to laugh.

"Fred," she said, peeping round to catch his eyes, which were sulkily turned away from her, "you are too delightfully ridiculous. If you were not such a charming simpleton, what a temptation this would be to play the wicked coquette and let you suppose that somebody besides you has made love to me."

"Do you really like me best, Mary?" said Fred, turning eyes full of affection on her and trying to take her hand.

"I don't like you at all at this moment," said Mary, retreating and putting her hands behind her. "I only said that no mortal ever made love to me besides you. And that is no argument that a very wise man ever will," she ended merrily.

“I wish you would tell me that you could not possibly ever think of him,” said Fred.

“Never dare to mention this any more to me, Fred,” said Mary, getting serious again. “I don’t know whether it is more stupid or ungenerous in you not to see that Mr. Farebrother has left us together on purpose that we might speak freely. I am disappointed that you should be so blind to his delicate feeling.”

There was no time to say any more before Mr. Farebrother came back with the engraving; and Fred had to return to the drawing-room still with a jealous dread in his heart, but yet with comforting arguments from Mary’s words and manner. The result of the conversation was on the whole more painful to Mary; inevitably her attention had taken a new attitude, and she saw the possibility of new interpretations. She was in a position in which she seemed to herself to be slighting Mr. Farebrother, and this, in relation to a man who is much honoured, is always dangerous to the firmness of a grateful woman. To have a reason for going home the next day was a relief, for Mary earnestly desired to be always clear that she loved Fred best. When a tender affection has been storing itself in us through many of our years, the idea that we could accept any exchange for it seems to be a cheapening of our lives. And we can set a watch over our affections and our constancy as we can over other treasures.

“Fred has lost all his other expectations; he must keep this,” Mary said to herself with a smile curling her lips. It was impossible to help fleeting visions of another kind—new dignities and an acknowledged value of which she had often felt the absence. But these things with Fred outside them, Fred forsaken and looking sad for the want of her, could never tempt her deliberate thought.

CHAPTER 58

For there can live no hatred in thine eye,
Therefore in that I cannot know thy change:
In many's looks the false heart's history
Is writ in moods and frowns and wrinkles strange;
But Heaven in thy creation did decree
That in thy face sweet love should ever dwell;
Whate'er thy thoughts or thy heart's workings be
Thy looks should nothing thence but sweetness tell.

—SHAKESPEARE: *Sonnets*

At the time when Mr. Vincy uttered that presentiment about Rosamond, she herself had never had the idea that she should be driven to make the sort of appeal which he foresaw. She had not yet had any anxiety about ways and means, although her domestic life had been expensive as well as eventful. Her baby had been born prematurely, and all the embroidered robes and caps had to be laid by in darkness. This misfortune was attributed entirely to her having persisted in going out on horseback one day when her husband had desired her not to do so, but it must not be supposed that she had shown temper on the occasion or rudely told him that she would do as she liked.

What led her particularly to desire horse-exercise was a visit from Captain Lydgate, the baronet's third son, who, I am sorry to say, was detested by our Tertius of that name as a vapid fop "parting his hair from brow to nape in a despicable fashion" (not followed by Tertius himself) and showing an ignorant security that he knew the proper thing to say on every topic. Lydgate inwardly cursed his own folly that he had drawn down this visit by consenting to go to his uncle's on the wedding-tour, and he made himself rather disagreeable to Rosamond by saying so in private. For to Rosamond this visit was a source of unprecedented but gracefully concealed exultation. She was so intensely conscious of having a cousin who was a baronet's son staying in the house that she imagined the knowledge of what was implied by his presence to be diffused through all other minds; and when she introduced Captain Lydgate to her guests, she had a placid sense that his rank penetrated them as if it had been an odour. The satisfaction was enough for the time to melt away some disappointment in the conditions of marriage with a medical man even of good birth; it seemed now that her marriage was visibly as well as ideally floating her above the Middlemarch level, and the future looked bright with letters and visits to and from Quallingham and vague advancement in consequence for Tertius. Especially as, probably at the captain's suggestion, his married sister, Mrs. Mengan, had come with her maid and stayed two nights on her way from town. Hence it was clearly worth while for Rosamond to take pains with her music and the careful selection of her lace.

As to Captain Lydgate himself, his low brow, his aquiline nose bent on one side, and his rather heavy utterance might have been disadvantageous in any young gentleman who had not a military bearing and mustache to give him what is doted on by some flower-like blond heads as "style." He had, moreover, that sort of high breeding which consists in being free from the petty solicitudes of middle-class gentility, and he was a great critic of feminine charms. Rosamond delighted in his admiration now even more than she had done at Quallingham, and he found it easy to spend several hours of the day in flirting with her. The visit altogether was one of the pleasantest larks he had ever had, not the less so perhaps because he suspected that his queer cousin Tertius wished him away, though Lydgate, who would rather (hyperbolically speaking) have died than have failed in polite hospitality, suppressed his dislike and only pretended generally not to hear what the gallant officer said, consigning the task of answering him to Rosamond. For he was not at all a jealous husband and preferred leaving a featherheaded young gentleman alone with his wife to bearing him company.

"I wish you would talk more to the captain at dinner, Tertius," said Rosamond one evening when the important guest was gone to Loamford to see some brother officers stationed there. "You really look so absent sometimes—you seem to be seeing through his head into something behind it instead of looking at him."

"My dear Rosy, you don't expect me to talk much to such a conceited ass as that, I hope," said Lydgate brusquely. "If he got his head broken, I might look at it with interest, not before."

"I cannot conceive why you should speak of your cousin so contemptuously," said Rosamond, her fingers moving at her work while she spoke with a mild gravity which had a touch of disdain in it.

"Ask Ladislaw if he doesn't think your captain the greatest bore he ever met with. Ladislaw has almost forsaken the house since he came."

Rosamond thought she knew perfectly well why Mr. Ladislaw disliked the captain: he was jealous, and she liked his being jealous.

"It is impossible to say what will suit eccentric persons," she answered, "but in my opinion Captain Lydgate is a thorough gentleman, and I think you ought not, out of respect to Sir Godwin, to treat him with neglect."

"No, dear, but we have had dinners for him. And he comes in and goes out as he likes. He doesn't want me."

"Still, when he is in the room, you might show him more attention. He may not be a phoenix of cleverness in your sense; his profession is different; but it would be all the better for you to talk a little on his subjects. *I* think his conversation is quite agreeable. And he is anything but an unprincipled man."

"The fact is, you would wish me to be a little more like him, Rosy," said Lydgate in a sort of resigned murmur with a

smile which was not exactly tender and certainly not merry. Rosamond was silent and did not smile again, but the lovely curves of her face looked good-tempered enough without smiling.

Those words of Lydgate's were like a sad milestone marking how far he had travelled from his old dreamland, in which Rosamond Vincy appeared to be that perfect piece of womanhood who would reverence her husband's mind after the fashion of an accomplished mermaid, using her comb and looking-glass and singing her song for the relaxation of his adored wisdom alone. He had begun to distinguish between that imagined adoration and the attraction towards a man's talent because it gives him prestige and is like an order in his button-hole or an "Honourable" before his name.

It might have been supposed that Rosamond had travelled too, since she had found the pointless conversation of Mr. Ned Plymdale perfectly wearisome; but to most mortals there is a stupidity which is unendurable and a stupidity which is altogether acceptable—else, indeed, what would become of social bonds? Captain Lydgate's stupidity was delicately scented, carried itself with "style," talked with a good accent, and was closely related to Sir Godwin. Rosamond found it quite agreeable and caught many of its phrases.

Therefore since Rosamond, as we know, was fond of horseback, there were plenty of reasons why she should be tempted to resume her riding when Captain Lydgate, who had ordered his man with two horses to follow him and put up at the Green Dragon, begged her to go out on the grey which he warranted to be gentle and trained to carry a lady—indeed, he had bought it for his sister and was taking it to Quallingham. Rosamond went out the first time without telling her husband, and came back before his return; but the ride had been so thorough a success, and she declared herself so much the better in consequence, that he was informed of it with full reliance on his consent that she should go riding again.

On the contrary, Lydgate was more than hurt—he was utterly confounded that she had risked herself on a strange horse without referring the matter to his wish. After the first almost thundering exclamations of astonishment, which sufficiently warned Rosamond of what was coming, he was silent for some moments.

"However, you have come back safely," he said at last in a decisive tone. "You will not go again, Rosy; that is understood. If it were the quietest, most familiar horse in the world, there would always be the chance of accident. And you know very well that I wished you to give up riding the roan on that account."

"But there is the chance of accident indoors, Tertius."

"My darling, don't talk nonsense," said Lydgate in an imploring tone; "surely I am the person to judge for you. I think it is enough that I say you are not to go again."

Rosamond was arranging her hair before dinner, and the reflection of her head in the glass showed no change in its loveliness except a little turning aside of the long neck. Lydgate had been moving about with his hands in his pockets and now paused near her as if he awaited some assurance.

"I wish you would fasten up my plaits, dear," said Rosamond, letting her arms fall with a little sigh so as to make a husband ashamed of standing there like a brute. Lydgate had often fastened the plaits before, being among the deftest of men with his large, finely formed fingers. He swept up the soft festoons of plaits and fastened in the tall comb (to such uses do men come!); and what could he do then but kiss the exquisite nape which was shown in all its delicate curves? But when we do what we have done before, it is often with a difference. Lydgate was still angry and had not forgotten his point.

"I shall tell the captain that he ought to have known better than offer you his horse," he said as he moved away.

"I beg you will not do anything of the kind, Tertius," said Rosamond, looking at him with something more marked than usual in her speech. "It will be treating me as if I were a child. Promise that you will leave the subject to me."

There did seem to be some truth in her objection. Lydgate said, "Very well," with a surly obedience, and thus the discussion ended with his promising Rosamond, and not with her promising him.

In fact, she had been determined not to promise. Rosamond had that victorious obstinacy which never wastes its energy in impetuous resistance. What she liked to do was to her the right thing, and all her cleverness was directed to getting the means of doing it. She meant to go out riding again on the grey, and she did go on the next opportunity of her husband's absence, not intending that he should know until it was late enough not to signify to her. The temptation was certainly great; she was very fond of the exercise, and the gratification of riding on a fine horse with Captain Lydgate, Sir Godwin's son, on another fine horse by her side, and of being met in this position by anyone but her husband, was something as good as her dreams before marriage. Moreover, she was riveting the connexion with the family at Quallingham, which must be a wise thing to do.

But the gentle grey, unprepared for the crash of a tree that was being felled on the edge of Halsell wood, took fright, and caused a worse fright to Rosamond, leading finally to the loss of her baby. Lydgate could not show his anger towards her, but he was rather bearish to the captain, whose visit naturally soon came to an end.

In all future conversations on the subject, Rosamond was mildly certain that the ride had made no difference and that if she had stayed at home the same symptoms would have come on and would have ended in the same way, because she had felt something like them before.

Lydgate could only say, "Poor, poor darling!" but he secretly wondered over the terrible tenacity of this mild creature. There was gathering within him an amazed sense of his powerlessness over Rosamond. His superior knowledge and mental force, instead of being, as he had imagined, a shrine to consult on all occasions, was simply set aside on every practical question. He had regarded Rosamond's cleverness as precisely of the receptive kind which became a woman. He was now beginning to find out what that cleverness was, what was the shape into which it had run as into a close network aloof and independent. No one quicker than Rosamond to see causes and effects which lay within the track of her own tastes and interests; she had seen clearly Lydgate's pre-eminence in Middlemarch society, and could go on imaginatively tracing still more agreeable social effects when his talent should have advanced him; but for her, his professional and scientific ambition had no other relation to these desirable effects than if they had been the fortunate discovery of an ill-smelling oil. And that oil apart, with which she had nothing to do, of course she believed in her own opinion more than she did in his. Lydgate was astounded to find in numberless trifling matters, as well as in this last serious case of the riding, that affection did not make her compliant. He had no doubt that the affection was there, and had no presentiment that he had done

anything to repel it. For his own part he said to himself that he loved her as tenderly as ever and could make up his mind to her negations; but—well! Lydgate was much worried and conscious of new elements in his life as noxious to him as an inlet of mud to a creature that had been used to breathe and bathe and dart after its illuminated prey in the clearest of waters.

Rosamond was soon looking lovelier than ever at her work-table, enjoying drives in her father's phaeton, and thinking it likely that she might be invited to Quallingham. She knew that she was a much more exquisite ornament to the drawing-room there than any daughter of the family, and in reflecting that the gentlemen were aware of that, did not perhaps sufficiently consider whether the ladies would be eager to see themselves surpassed.

Lydgate, relieved from anxiety about her, relapsed into what she inwardly called his moodiness—a name which to her covered his thoughtful preoccupation with other subjects than herself, as well as that uneasy look of the brow and distaste for all ordinary things as if they were mixed with bitter herbs, which really made a sort of weather-glass to his vexation and foreboding. These latter states of mind had one cause amongst others, which he had generously but mistakenly avoided mentioning to Rosamond lest it should affect her health and spirits. Between him and her indeed there was that total missing of each other's mental track, which is too evidently possible even between persons who are continually thinking of each other. To Lydgate it seemed that he had been spending month after month in sacrificing more than half of his best intent and best power to his tenderness for Rosamond, bearing her little claims and interruptions without impatience and, above all, bearing without betrayal of bitterness to look through less and less of interfering illusion at the blank, unreflecting surface her mind presented to his ardour for the more impersonal ends of his profession and his scientific study, an ardour which he had fancied that the ideal wife must somehow worship as sublime, though not in the least knowing why. But his endurance was mingled with a self-discontent which, if we know how to be candid, we shall confess to make more than half our bitterness under grievances, wife or husband included. It always remains true that if we had been greater, circumstance would have been less strong against us. Lydgate was aware that his concessions to Rosamond were often little more than the lapse of slackening resolution, the creeping paralysis apt to seize an enthusiasm which is out of adjustment to a constant portion of our lives. And on Lydgate's enthusiasm there was constantly pressing not a simple weight of sorrow, but the biting presence of a petty, degrading care such as casts the blight of irony over all higher effort.

This was the care which he had hitherto abstained from mentioning to Rosamond; and he believed, with some wonder, that it had never entered her mind, though certainly no difficulty could be less mysterious. It was an inference with a conspicuous handle to it and had been easily drawn by indifferent observers that Lydgate was in debt; and he could not succeed in keeping out of his mind for long together that he was every day getting deeper into that swamp which tempts men towards it with such a pretty covering of flowers and verdure. It is wonderful how soon a man gets up to his chin there—in a condition in which, in spite of himself, he is forced to think chiefly of release, though he had a scheme of the universe in his soul.

Eighteen months ago Lydgate was poor but had never known the eager want of small sums, and felt rather a burning contempt for anyone who descended a step in order to gain them. He was now experiencing something worse than a simple deficit: he was assailed by the vulgar, hateful trials of a man who has bought and used a great many things which might have been done without and which he is unable to pay for, though the demand for payment has become pressing.

How this came about may be easily seen without much arithmetic or knowledge of prices. When a man in setting up a house and preparing for marriage finds that his furniture and other initial expenses come to between four and five hundred pounds more than he has capital to pay for, when at the end of a year it appears that his household expenses, horses, and et ceteras amount to nearly a thousand, while the proceeds of the practice reckoned from the old books to be worth eight hundred per annum have sunk like a summer pond and make hardly five hundred chiefly in unpaid entries, the plain inference is that, whether he minds it or not, he is in debt. Those were less expensive times than our own, and provincial life was comparatively modest; but the ease with which a medical man who had lately bought a practice, who thought that he was obliged to keep two horses, whose table was supplied without stint, and who paid an insurance on his life and a high rent for house and garden might find his expenses doubling his receipts can be conceived by anyone who does not think these details beneath his consideration. Rosamond, accustomed from her childhood to an extravagant household, thought that good housekeeping consisted simply in ordering the best of everything—nothing else "answered"; and Lydgate supposed that "if things were done at all, they must be done properly"—he did not see how they were to live otherwise. If each head of household expenditure had been mentioned to him beforehand, he would have probably observed that "it could hardly come to much," and if anyone had suggested a saving on a particular article—for example, the substitution of cheap fish for dear—it would have appeared to him simply a penny-wise, mean notion. Rosamond, even without such an occasion as Captain Lydgate's visit, was fond of giving invitations, and Lydgate, though he often thought the guests tiresome, did not interfere. This sociability seemed a necessary part of professional prudence, and the entertainment must be suitable. It is true Lydgate was constantly visiting the homes of the poor and adjusting his prescriptions of diet to their small means; but—dear me!—has it not by this time ceased to be remarkable, is it not rather what we expect in men, that they should have numerous strands of experience lying side by side and never compare them with each other? Expenditure, like ugliness and errors, becomes a totally new thing when we attach our own personality to it and measure it by that wide difference which is manifest (in our own sensations) between ourselves and others. Lydgate believed himself to be careless about his dress, and he despised a man who calculated the effects of his costume; it seemed to him only a matter of course that he had abundance of fresh garments—such things were naturally ordered in sheaves. It must be remembered that he had never hitherto felt the check of importunate debt, and he walked by habit, not by self-criticism. But the check had come.

Its novelty made it the more irritating. He was amazed, disgusted, that conditions so foreign to all his purposes, so hatefully disconnected with the objects he cared to occupy himself with, should have lain in ambush and clutched him when he was unaware. And there was not only the actual debt; there was the certainty that in his present position he must go on deepening it. Two furnishing tradesmen at Brassing, whose bills had been incurred before his marriage and whom

uncalculated current expenses had ever since prevented him from paying, had repeatedly sent him unpleasant letters which had forced themselves on his attention. This could hardly have been more galling to any disposition than to Lydgate's, with his intense pride, his dislike of asking a favour or being under an obligation to anyone. He had scorned even to form conjectures about Mr. Vincy's intentions on money matters, and nothing but extremity could have induced him to apply to his father-in-law, even if he had not been made aware in various indirect ways since his marriage that Mr. Vincy's own affairs were not flourishing and that the expectation of help from him would be resented. Some men easily trust in the readiness of friends; it had never in the former part of his life occurred to Lydgate that he should need to do so: he had never thought what borrowing would be to him; but now that the idea had entered his mind, he felt that he would rather incur any other hardship. In the meantime he had no money or prospects of money, and his practice was not getting more lucrative.

No wonder that Lydgate had been unable to suppress all signs of inward trouble during the last few months, and now that Rosamond was regaining brilliant health, he meditated taking her entirely into confidence on his difficulties. New conversance with tradesmen's bills had forced his reasoning into a new channel of comparison: he had begun to consider from a new point of view what was necessary and unnecessary in goods ordered and to see that there must be some change of habits. How could such a change be made with Rosamond's concurrence? The immediate occasion of opening the disagreeable fact to her was forced upon him.

Having no money, and having privately sought advice as to what security could possibly be given by a man in his position, Lydgate had offered the one good security in his power to the less peremptory creditor, who was a silversmith and jeweller and who consented to take on himself the upholsterer's credit also, accepting interest for a given term. The security necessary was a bill of sale on the furniture of his house, which might make a creditor easy for a reasonable time about a debt amounting to less than four hundred pounds; and the silversmith, Mr. Dover, was willing to reduce it by taking back a portion of the plate and any other article which was as good as new. "Any other article" was a phrase delicately implying jewellery, and more particularly some purple amethysts costing thirty pounds, which Lydgate had bought as a bridal present.

Opinions may be divided as to his wisdom in making this present: some may think that it was a graceful attention to be expected from a man like Lydgate and that the fault of any troublesome consequences lay in the pinched narrowness of provincial life at that time, which offered no conveniences for professional people whose fortune was not proportioned to their tastes; also, in Lydgate's ridiculous fastidiousness about asking his friends for money.

However, it had seemed a question of no moment to him on that fine morning when he went to give a final order for plate; in the presence of other jewels enormously expensive, and as an addition to orders of which the amount had not been exactly calculated, thirty pounds for ornaments so exquisitely suited to Rosamond's neck and arms could hardly appear excessive when there was no ready cash for it to exceed. But at this crisis Lydgate's imagination could not help dwelling on the possibility of letting the amethysts take their place again among Mr. Dover's stock, though he shrank from the idea of proposing this to Rosamond. Having been roused to discern consequences which he had never been in the habit of tracing, he was preparing to act on this discernment with some of the rigour (by no means all) that he would have applied in pursuing experiment. He was nerving himself to this rigour as he rode from Brassing, and meditated on the representations he must make to Rosamond.

It was evening when he got home. He was intensely miserable, this strong man of nine-and-twenty and of many gifts. He was not saying angrily within himself that he had made a profound mistake; but the mistake was at work in him like a recognized chronic disease, mingling its uneasy importunities with every prospect and enfeebling every thought. As he went along the passage to the drawing-room, he heard the piano and singing. Of course, Ladislaw was there. It was some weeks since Will had parted from Dorothea, yet he was still at the old post in Middlemarch. Lydgate had no objection in general to Ladislaw's coming, but just now he was annoyed that he could not find his hearth free. When he opened the door the two singers went on towards the key-note, raising their eyes and looking at him indeed, but not regarding his entrance as an interruption. To a man galled with his harness as poor Lydgate was, it is not soothing to see two people warbling at him as he comes in with the sense that the painful day has still pains in store. His face, already paler than usual, took on a scowl as he walked across the room and flung himself into a chair.

The singers, feeling themselves excused by the fact that they had had only three bars to sing, now turned round. "How are you, Lydgate?" said Will, coming forward to shake hands.

Lydgate took his hand but did not think it necessary to speak.

"Have you dined, Tertius? I expected you much earlier," said Rosamond, who had already seen that her husband was in a "horrible humour." She seated herself in her usual place as she spoke.

"I have dined. I should like some tea, please," said Lydgate curtly, still scowling and looking markedly at his legs, stretched out before him.

Will was too quick to need more. "I shall be off," he said, reaching his hat.

"Tea is coming," said Rosamond; "pray don't go."

"Yes, Lydgate is bored," said Will, who had more comprehension of Lydgate than Rosamond had and was not offended by his manner, easily imagining outdoor causes of annoyance.

"There is the more need for you to stay," said Rosamond playfully and in her lightest accent; "he will not speak to me all the evening."

"Yes, Rosamond, I shall," said Lydgate in his strong baritone. "I have some serious business to speak to you about."

No introduction of the business could have been less like that which Lydgate had intended, but her indifferent manner had been too provoking.

"There! You see," said Will. "I'm going to the meeting about the Mechanics' Institute. Good-bye"; and he went quickly out of the room.

Rosamond did not look at her husband but presently rose and took her place before the tea-tray. She was thinking that she had never seen him so disagreeable. Lydgate turned his dark eyes on her and watched her as she delicately handled the

tea-service with her taper fingers and looked at the objects immediately before her with no curve in her face disturbed, and yet with an ineffable protest in her air against all people with unpleasant manners. For the moment he lost the sense of his wound in a sudden speculation about this new form of feminine impassibility revealing itself in the sylphlike frame which he had once interpreted as the sign of a ready, intelligent sensitiveness. His mind glancing back to Laure while he looked at Rosamond, he said inwardly, "Would *she* kill me because I wearied her?" And then, "It is the way with all women." But this power of generalizing which gives men so much the superiority in mistake over the dumb animals was immediately thwarted by Lydgate's memory of wondering impressions from the behaviour of another woman—from Dorothea's looks and tones of emotion about her husband when Lydgate began to attend him—from her passionate cry to be taught what would best comfort that man for whose sake it seemed as if she must quell every impulse in her except the yearnings of faithfulness and compassion. These revived impressions succeeded each other quickly and dreamily in Lydgate's mind while the tea was being brewed. He had shut his eyes in the last instant of reverie while he heard Dorothea saying, "Advise me—think what I can do—he has been all his life labouring and looking forward. He minds about nothing else—and I mind about nothing else."

That voice of deep-souled womanhood had remained within him as the enkindling conceptions of dead and sceptred genius had remained within him (is there not a genius for feeling nobly which also reigns over human spirits and their conclusions?); the tones were a music from which he was falling away—he had really fallen into a momentary doze when Rosamond said in her silvery, neutral way, "Here is your tea, Tertius," setting it on the small table by his side, and then moved back to her place without looking at him. Lydgate was too hasty in attributing insensibility to her; after her own fashion, she was sensitive enough and took lasting impressions. Her impression now was one of offence and repulsion. But then, Rosamond had no scowls and had never raised her voice; she was quite sure that no one could justly find fault with her.

Perhaps Lydgate and she had never felt so far off each other before; but there were strong reasons for not deferring his revelation, even if he had not already begun it by the abrupt announcement; indeed some of the angry desire to rouse her into more sensibility on his account which had prompted him to speak prematurely still mingled with his pain in the prospect of her pain. But he waited till the tray was gone, the candles were lit, and the evening quiet might be counted on; the interval had left time for repelled tenderness to return into the old course. He spoke kindly.

"Dear Rosy, lay down your work and come to sit by me," he said gently, pushing away the table and stretching out his arm to draw a chair near his own.

Rosamond obeyed. As she came towards him in her drapery of transparent, faintly tinted muslin, her slim yet round figure never looked more graceful; as she sat down by him and laid one hand on the elbow of his chair, at last looking at him and meeting his eyes, her delicate neck and cheek and purely cut lips never had more of that untarnished beauty which touches us in springtime and infancy and all sweet freshness. It touched Lydgate now and mingled the early moments of his love for her with all the other memories which were stirred in this crisis of deep trouble. He laid his ample hand softly on hers, saying, "Dear!" with the lingering utterance which affection gives to the word. Rosamond too was still under the power of that same past, and her husband was still in part the Lydgate whose approval had stirred delight. She put his hair lightly away from his forehead, then laid her other hand on his, and was conscious of forgiving him.

"I am obliged to tell you what will hurt you, Rosy. But there are things which husband and wife must think of together. I dare say it has occurred to you already that I am short of money."

Lydgate paused, but Rosamond turned her neck and looked at a vase on the mantelpiece.

"I was not able to pay for all the things we had to get before we were married, and there have been expenses since which I have been obliged to meet. The consequence is, there is a large debt at Brassing—three hundred and eighty pounds—which has been pressing on me a good while, and in fact we are getting deeper every day, for people don't pay me the faster because others want the money. I took pains to keep it from you while you were not well, but now we must think together about it, and you must help me."

"What can *I* do, Tertius?" said Rosamond, turning her eyes on him again. That little speech of four words, like so many others in all languages, is capable by varied vocal inflexions of expressing all states of mind from helpless dimness to exhaustive, argumentative perception, from the completest self-devoting fellowship to the most neutral aloofness. Rosamond's thin utterance threw into the words "What can *I* do!" as much neutrality as they could hold. They fell like a mortal chill on Lydgate's roused tenderness. He did not storm in indignation—he felt too sad a sinking of the heart. And when he spoke again it was more in the tone of a man who forces himself to fulfil a task.

"It is necessary for you to know because I have to give security for a time, and a man must come to make an inventory of the furniture."

Rosamond coloured deeply. "Have you not asked Papa for money?" she said as soon as she could speak.

"No."

"Then I must ask him!" she said, releasing her hands from Lydgate's and rising to stand at two yards' distance from him.

"No, Rosy," said Lydgate decisively. "It is too late to do that. The inventory will be begun tomorrow. Remember it is a mere security; it will make no difference; it is a temporary affair. I insist upon it that your father shall not know unless I choose to tell him," added Lydgate with a more peremptory emphasis.

This certainly was unkind, but Rosamond had thrown him back on evil expectation as to what she would do in the way of quiet, steady disobedience. The unkindness seemed unpardonable to her; she was not given to weeping and disliked it, but now her chin and lips began to tremble and the tears welled up. Perhaps it was not possible for Lydgate, under the double stress of outward material difficulty and of his own proud resistance to humiliating consequences, to imagine fully what this sudden trial was to a young creature who had known nothing but indulgence and whose dreams had all been of new indulgence, more exactly to her taste. But he did wish to spare her as much as he could, and her tears cut him to the heart. He could not speak again immediately, but Rosamond did not go on sobbing; she tried to conquer her agitation and wiped away her tears, continuing to look before her at the mantelpiece.

"Try not to grieve, darling," said Lydgate, turning his eyes up towards her. That she had chosen to move away from him

in this moment of her trouble made everything harder to say, but he must absolutely go on. “We must brace ourselves to do what is necessary. It is I who have been in fault; I ought to have seen that I could not afford to live in this way. But many things have told against me in my practice, and it really just now has ebbed to a low point. I may recover it, but in the meantime we must pull up—we must change our way of living. We shall weather it. When I have given this security I shall have time to look about me; and you are so clever that if you turn your mind to managing you will school me into carefulness. I have been a thoughtless rascal about squaring prices—but come, dear, sit down and forgive me.”

Lydgate was bowing his neck under the yoke like a creature who had talons but who had reason too, which often reduces us to meekness. When he had spoken the last words in an imploring tone, Rosamond returned to the chair by his side. His self-blame gave her some hope that he would attend to her opinion, and she said, “Why can you not put off having the inventory made? You can send the men away tomorrow when they come.”

“I shall not send them away,” said Lydgate, the peremptoriness rising again. Was it of any use to explain?

“If we left Middlemarch, there would of course be a sale, and that would do as well.”

“But we are not going to leave Middlemarch.”

“I am sure, Tertius, it would be much better to do so. Why can we not go to London? Or near Durham, where your family is known?”

“We can go nowhere without money, Rosamond.”

“Your friends would not wish you to be without money. And surely these odious tradesmen might be made to understand that and to wait if you would make proper representations to them.”

“This is idle, Rosamond,” said Lydgate angrily. “You must learn to take my judgement on questions you don’t understand. I have made necessary arrangements, and they must be carried out. As to friends, I have no expectations whatever from them and shall not ask them for anything.”

Rosamond sat perfectly still. The thought in her mind was that if she had known how Lydgate would behave, she would never have married him.

“We have no time to waste now on unnecessary words, dear,” said Lydgate, trying to be gentle again. “There are some details that I want to consider with you. Dover says he will take a good deal of the plate back again, and any of the jewellery we like. He really behaves very well.”

“Are we to go without spoons and forks then?” said Rosamond, whose very lips seemed to get thinner with the thinness of her utterance. She was determined to make no further resistance or suggestions.

“Oh no, dear!” said Lydgate. “But look here,” he continued, drawing a paper from his pocket and opening it; “here is Dover’s account. See, I have marked a number of articles which if we returned them would reduce the amount by thirty pounds and more. I have not marked any of the jewellery.” Lydgate had really felt this point of the jewellery very bitter to himself, but he had overcome the feeling by severe argument. He could not propose to Rosamond that she should return any particular present of his, but he had told himself that he was bound to put Dover’s offer before her, and her inward prompting might make the affair easy.

“It is useless for me to look, Tertius,” said Rosamond calmly; “you will return what you please.” She would not turn her eyes on the paper, and Lydgate, flushing up to the roots of his hair, drew it back and let it fall on his knee. Meanwhile Rosamond quietly went out of the room, leaving Lydgate helpless and wondering. Was she not coming back? It seemed that she had no more identified herself with him than if they had been creatures of different species and opposing interests. He tossed his head and thrust his hands deep into his pockets with a sort of vengeance. There was still science—there were still good objects to work for. He must give a tug still, all the stronger because other satisfactions were going.

But the door opened and Rosamond re-entered. She carried the leather box containing the amethysts and a tiny ornamental basket which contained other boxes, and laying them on the chair where she had been sitting, she said with perfect propriety in her air, “This is all the jewellery you ever gave me. You can return what you like of it, and of the plate also. You will not, of course, expect me to stay at home tomorrow. I shall go to Papa’s.”

To many women the look Lydgate cast at her would have been more terrible than one of anger; it had in it a despairing acceptance of the distance she was placing between them.

“And when shall you come back again?” he said with a bitter edge on his accent.

“Oh, in the evening. Of course I shall not mention the subject to Mamma.” Rosamond was convinced that no woman could behave more irreproachably than she was behaving, and she went to sit down at her work-table. Lydgate sat meditating a minute or two, and the result was that he said with some of the old emotion in his tone, “Now we have been united, Rosy, you should not leave me to myself in the first trouble that has come.”

“Certainly not,” said Rosamond; “I shall do everything it becomes me to do.”

“It is not right that the thing should be left to servants or that I should have to speak to them about it. And I shall be obliged to go out—I don’t know how early. I understand your shrinking from the humiliation of these money affairs. But, my dear Rosamond, as a question of pride, which I feel just as much as you can, it is surely better to manage the thing ourselves and let the servants see as little of it as possible; and since you are my wife, there is no hindering your share in my disgraces—if there were disgraces.”

Rosamond did not answer immediately, but at last she said, “Very well, I will stay at home.”

“I shall not touch these jewels, Rosy. Take them away again. But I will write out a list of plate that we may return, and that can be packed up and sent at once.”

“The servants will know *that*,” said Rosamond with the slightest touch of sarcasm.

“Well, we must meet some disagreeables as necessities. Where is the ink, I wonder?” said Lydgate, rising and throwing the account on the larger table, where he meant to write.

Rosamond went to reach the inkstand and after setting it on the table was going to turn away when Lydgate, who was standing close by, put his arm round her and drew her towards him, saying, “Come, darling, let us make the best of things. It will only be for a time, I hope, that we shall have to be stingy and particular. Kiss me.”

His native warm-heartedness took a great deal of quenching, and it is a part of manliness for a husband to feel keenly

the fact that an inexperienced girl has got into trouble by marrying him. She received his kiss and returned it faintly, and in this way an appearance of accord was recovered for the time. But Lydgate could not help looking forward with dread to the inevitable future discussions about expenditure and the necessity for a complete change in their way of living.

CHAPTER 59

They said of old the Soul had human shape,
But smaller, subtler than the fleshly self,
So wandered forth for airing when it pleased.
And see! beside her cherub-face there floats
A pale-lipped form aerial whispering
Its promptings in that little shell her ear.

News is often dispersed as thoughtlessly and effectively as that pollen which the bees carry off (having no idea how powdery they are) when they are buzzing in search of their particular nectar. This fine comparison has reference to Fred Vincy, who on that evening at Lowick parsonage heard a lively discussion among the ladies on the news which their old servant had got from Tantripp concerning Mr. Casaubon's strange mention of Mr. Ladislaw in a codicil to his will made not long before his death. Miss Winifred was astounded to find that her brother had known the fact before and observed that Camden was the most wonderful man for knowing things and not telling them; whereupon Mary Garth said that the codicil had perhaps got mixed up with the habits of spiders, which Miss Winifred never would listen to. Mrs. Farebrother considered that the news had something to do with their having only once seen Mr. Ladislaw at Lowick, and Miss Noble made many small compassionate mewings.

Fred knew little and cared less about Ladislaw and the Casaubons, and his mind never recurred to that discussion till one day, calling on Rosamond at his mother's request to deliver a message as he passed, he happened to see Ladislaw going away. Fred and Rosamond had little to say to each other now that marriage had removed her from collision with the unpleasantness of brothers, and especially now that he had taken what she held the stupid and even reprehensible step of giving up the Church to take to such a business as Mr. Garth's. Hence Fred talked by preference of what he considered indifferent news and "*à propos* of that young Ladislaw" mentioned what he had heard at Lowick parsonage.

Now Lydgate, like Mr. Farebrother, knew a great deal more than he told, and when he had once been set thinking about the relation between Will and Dorothea his conjectures had gone beyond the fact. He imagined that there was a passionate attachment on both sides, and this struck him as much too serious to gossip about. He remembered Will's irritability when he had mentioned Mrs. Casaubon and was the more circumspect. On the whole his surmises, in addition to what he knew of the fact, increased his friendliness and tolerance towards Ladislaw and made him understand the vacillation which kept him at Middlemarch after he had said that he should go away. It was significant of the separateness between Lydgate's mind and Rosamond's that he had no impulse to speak to her on the subject; indeed, he did not quite trust her reticence towards Will. And he was right there, though he had no vision of the way in which her mind would act in urging her to speak.

When she repeated Fred's news to Lydgate, he said, "Take care you don't drop the faintest hint to Ladislaw, Rosy. He is likely to fly out as if you insulted him. Of course it is a painful affair."

Rosamond turned her neck and patted her hair, looking the image of placid indifference. But the next time Will came when Lydgate was away, she spoke archly about his not going to London as he had threatened.

"I know all about it. I have a confidential little bird," said she, showing very pretty airs of her head over the bit of work held high between her active fingers. "There is a powerful magnet in this neighbourhood."

"To be sure there is. Nobody knows that better than you," said Will with light gallantry but inwardly prepared to be angry.

"It is really the most charming romance: Mr. Casaubon jealous, and foreseeing that there was no one else whom Mrs. Casaubon would so much like to marry, and no one who would so much like to marry her as a certain gentleman; and then laying a plan to spoil all by making her forfeit her property if she did marry that gentleman—and then—and then—and then—oh, I have no doubt the end will be thoroughly romantic."

"Great God! What do you mean?" said Will, flushing over face and ears, his features seeming to change as if he had had a violent shake. "Don't joke; tell me what you mean."

"You don't really know?" said Rosamond, no longer playful and desiring nothing better than to tell in order that she might evoke effects.

"No!" he returned impatiently.

"Don't know that Mr. Casaubon has left it in his will that if Mrs. Casaubon marries you she is to forfeit all her property?"

"How do you know that it is true?" said Will eagerly.

"My brother Fred heard it from the Farebrothers."

Will started up from his chair and reached his hat.

"I dare say she likes you better than the property," said Rosamond, looking at him from a distance.

"Pray don't say any more about it," said Will in a hoarse undertone extremely unlike his usual light voice. "It is a foul insult to her and to me." Then he sat down absently, looking before him but seeing nothing.

"Now you are angry with *me*," said Rosamond. "It is too bad to bear *me* malice. You ought to be obliged to me for telling you."

“So I am,” said Will abruptly, speaking with that kind of double soul which belongs to dreamers who answer questions.

“I expect to hear of the marriage,” said Rosamond playfully.

“Never! You will never hear of the marriage!”

With those words uttered impetuously, Will rose, put out his hand to Rosamond, still with the air of a somnambulist, and went away.

When he was gone, Rosamond left her chair and walked to the other end of the room, leaning when she got there against a *chiffonnière* and looking out of the window wearily. She was oppressed by ennui and by that dissatisfaction which in women’s minds is continually turning into a trivial jealousy, referring to no real claims, springing from no deeper passion than the vague exactingness of egoism, and yet capable of impelling action as well as speech. “There really is nothing to care for much,” said poor Rosamond inwardly, thinking of the family at Quallingham, who did not write to her, and that perhaps Tertius when he came home would tease her about expenses. She had already secretly disobeyed him by asking her father to help them, and he had ended decisively by saying, “I am more likely to want help myself.”

CHAPTER 60

Good phrases are surely, and ever were, very commendable.

—JUSTICE SHALLOW

A few days afterwards—it was already the end of August—there was an occasion which caused some excitement in Middlemarch: the public, if it chose, was to have the advantage of buying, under the distinguished auspices of Mr. Borthrop Trumbull, the furniture, books, and pictures which anybody might see by the handbills to be the best in every kind, belonging to Edwin Larcher, Esq. This was not one of the sales indicating the depression of trade; on the contrary, it was due to Mr. Larcher's great success in the carrying business, which warranted his purchase of a mansion near Riverston already furnished in high style by an illustrious Spa physician—furnished indeed with such large framefuls of expensive flesh-painting in the dining-room that Mrs. Larcher was nervous until reassured by finding the subjects to be Scriptural. Hence the fine opportunity to purchasers which was well pointed out in the handbills of Mr. Borthrop Trumbull, whose acquaintance with the history of art enabled him to state that the hall furniture, to be sold without reserve, comprised a piece of carving by a contemporary of Gibbons.

At Middlemarch in those times a large sale was regarded as a kind of festival. There was a table spread with the best cold eatables, as at a superior funeral; and facilities were offered for that generous drinking of cheerful glasses which might lead to generous and cheerful bidding for undesirable articles. Mr. Larcher's sale was the more attractive in the fine weather because the house stood just at the end of the town, with a garden and stables attached, in that pleasant issue from Middlemarch called the London Road, which was also the road to the new hospital and to Mr. Bulstrode's retired residence, known as the Shrubs. In short, the auction was as good as a fair and drew all classes with leisure at command; to some, who risked making bids in order simply to raise prices, it was almost equal to betting at the races. The second day, when the best furniture was to be sold, "everybody" was there; even Mr. Thesiger, the rector of St. Peter's, had looked in for a short time, wishing to buy the carved table, and had rubbed elbows with Mr. Bambridge and Mr. Horrock. There was a wreath of Middlemarch ladies accommodated with seats round the large table in the dining-room, where Mr. Borthrop Trumbull was mounted with desk and hammer; but the rows chiefly of masculine faces behind were often varied by incomings and outgoings both from the door and the large bow-window opening on to the lawn.

"Everybody" that day did not include Mr. Bulstrode, whose health could not well endure crowds and draughts. But Mrs. Bulstrode had particularly wished to have a certain picture—a *Supper at Emmaus*, attributed in the catalogue to Guido; and at the last moment before the day of the sale Mr. Bulstrode had called at the office of the *Pioneer*, of which he was now one of the proprietors, to beg of Mr. Ladislaw as a great favour that he would obligingly use his remarkable knowledge of pictures on behalf of Mrs. Bulstrode and judge of the value of this particular painting. "If," added the scrupulously polite banker, "attendance at the sale would not interfere with the arrangements for your departure, which I know is imminent."

This proviso might have sounded rather satirically in Will's ear if he had been in a mood to care about such satire. It referred to an understanding entered into many weeks before with the proprietors of the paper that he should be at liberty any day he pleased to hand over the management to the sub-editor whom he had been training, since he wished finally to quit Middlemarch. But indefinite visions of ambition are weak against the ease of doing what is habitual or beguilingly agreeable, and we all know the difficulty of carrying out a resolve when we secretly long that it may turn out to be unnecessary. In such states of mind the most incredulous person has a private leaning towards miracle: impossible to conceive how our wish could be fulfilled, still—very wonderful things have happened! Will did not confess this weakness to himself, but he lingered. What was the use of going to London at that time of the year? The Rugby men who would remember him were not there; and so far as political writing was concerned, he would rather for a few weeks go on with the *Pioneer*. At the present moment, however, when Mr. Bulstrode was speaking to him, he had both a strengthened resolve to go and an equally strong resolve not to go till he had once more seen Dorothea. Hence he replied that he had reasons for deferring his departure a little and would be happy to go to the sale.

Will was in a defiant mood, his consciousness being deeply stung with the thought that the people who looked at him probably knew a fact tantamount to an accusation against him as a fellow with low designs which were to be frustrated by a disposal of property. Like most people who assert their freedom with regard to conventional distinction, he was prepared to be sudden and quick at quarrel with anyone who might hint that he had personal reasons for that assertion—that there was anything in his blood, his bearing, or his character to which he gave the mask of an opinion. When he was under an irritating impression of this kind he would go about for days with a defiant look, the colour changing in his transparent skin as if he were on the *qui vive*, watching for something which he had to dart upon.

This expression was peculiarly noticeable in him at the sale, and those who had only seen him in his moods of gentle oddity or of bright enjoyment would have been struck with a contrast. He was not sorry to have this occasion for appearing in public before the Middlemarch tribes of Toller, Hackbutt, and the rest, who looked down on him as an adventurer, and were in a state of brutal ignorance about Dante—who sneered at his Polish blood and were themselves of a breed very much in need of crossing. He stood in a conspicuous place not far from the auctioneer, with a forefinger in each side pocket and his head thrown backward, not caring to speak to anybody, though he had been cordially welcomed as a connoiss*ure*

by Mr. Trumbull, who was enjoying the utmost activity of his great faculties.

And surely among all men whose vocation requires them to exhibit their powers of speech, the happiest is a prosperous provincial auctioneer keenly alive to his own jokes and sensible of his encyclopaedic knowledge. Some saturnine, sour-blooded persons might object to be constantly insisting on the merits of all articles from boot-jacks to "Berghems," but Mr. Borthrop Trumbull had a kindly liquid in his veins; he was an admirer by nature and would have liked to have the universe under his hammer, feeling that it would go at a higher figure for his recommendation.

Meanwhile Mrs. Larcher's drawing-room furniture was enough for him. When Will Ladislaw had come in, a second fender, said to have been forgotten in its right place, suddenly claimed the auctioneer's enthusiasm, which he distributed on the equitable principle of praising those things most which were most in need of praise. The fender was of polished steel, with much lancet-shaped open-work and a sharp edge.

"Now, ladies," said he, "I shall appeal to you. Here is a fender which at any other sale would hardly be offered without reserve, being, as I may say, for quality of steel and quaintness of design, a kind of thing"—here Mr. Trumbull dropped his voice and became slightly nasal, trimming his outlines with his left finger—"that might not fall in with ordinary tastes. Allow me to tell you that by and by this style of workmanship will be the only one in vogue—half-a-crown you said? Thank you—going at half-a-crown, this characteristic fender; and I have particular information that the antique style is very much sought after in high quarters. Three shillings—three-and-sixpence—hold it well up, Joseph! Look, ladies, at the chastity of the design—I have no doubt myself that it was turned out in the last century! Four shillings, Mr. Mawmsey? Four shillings."

"It's not a thing I would put in *my* drawing-room," said Mrs. Mawmsey audibly, for the warning of the rash husband. "I wonder *at* Mrs. Larcher. Every blessed child's head that fell against it would be cut in two. The edge is like a knife."

"Quite true," rejoined Mr. Trumbull quickly, "and most uncommonly useful to have a fender at hand that will cut, if you have a leather shoetie or a bit of string that wants cutting and no knife at hand; many a man has been left hanging because there was no knife to cut him down. Gentlemen, here's a fender that if you had the misfortune to hang yourselves would cut you down in no time—with astonishing celerity—four-and-sixpence—five—five-and-sixpence—an appropriate thing for a spare bedroom where there was a four-poster and a guest a little out of his mind—six shillings—thank you, Mr. Clintup—going at six shillings—going—gone!" The auctioneer's glance, which had been searching round him with a preternatural susceptibility to all signs of bidding, here dropped on the paper before him, and his voice too dropped into a tone of indifferent dispatch as he said, "Mr. Clintup. Be handy, Joseph."

"It was worth six shillings to have a fender you could always tell that joke on," said Mr. Clintup, laughing low and apologetically to his next neighbour. He was a diffident though distinguished nurseryman and feared that the audience might regard his bid as a foolish one.

Meanwhile Joseph had brought a trayful of small articles. "Now, ladies," said Mr. Trumbull, taking up one of the articles, "this tray contains a vedy recherchy lot—a collection of trifles for the drawing-room table—and trifles make the sum of human things—nothing more important than trifles—(yes, Mr. Ladislaw, yes, by and by)—but pass the tray round, Joseph—these bijoux must be examined, ladies. This I have in my hand is an ingenious contrivance—a sort of practical rebus, I may call it; here, you see, it looks like an elegant heart-shaped box, portable—for the pocket; there, again, it becomes like a splendid double flower—an ornament for the table; and now"—Mr. Trumbull allowed the flower to fall alarmingly into strings of heart-shaped leaves—"a book of riddles! No less than five hundred printed in a beautiful red. Gentlemen, if I had less of a conscience, I should not wish you to bid high for this lot—I have a longing for it myself. What can promote innocent mirth, and I may say virtue, more than a good riddle? It hinders profane language and attaches a man to the society of refined females. This ingenious article itself, without the elegant domino-box, card-basket, etc., ought alone to give a high price to the lot. Carried in the pocket it might make an individual welcome in any society. Four shillings, sir? Four shillings for this remarkable collection of riddles with the et ceteras. Here is a sample: 'How must you spell honey to make it catch lady-birds? Answer—money.' You hear? Lady-birds honey—money. This is an amusement to sharpen the intellect; it has a sting—it has what we call satire, and wit without indecency. Four-and-sixpence—five shillings."

The bidding ran on with warming rivalry. Mr. Bowyer was a bidder, and this was too exasperating. Bowyer couldn't afford it and only wanted to hinder every other man from making a figure. The current carried even Mr. Horrock with it, but this committal of himself to an opinion fell from him with so little sacrifice of his neutral expression that the bid might not have been detected as his but for the friendly oaths of Mr. Bambridge, who wanted to know what Horrock would do with blasted stuff only fit for haberdashers given over to that state of perdition which the horse-dealer so cordially recognized in the majority of earthly existences. The lot was finally knocked down at a guinea to Mr. Spilkins, a young Slender of the neighbourhood who was reckless with his pocket-money and felt his want of memory for riddles.

"Come, Trumbull, this is too bad—you've been putting some old maid's rubbish into the sale," murmured Mr. Toller, getting close to the auctioneer. "I want to see how the prints go, and I must be off soon."

"*Im*mediately, Mr. Toller. It was only an act of benevolence which your noble heart would approve. Joseph! Quick with the prints—Lot 235. Now, gentlemen, you who are connois*sures*, you are going to have a treat. Here is an engraving of the Duke of Wellington surrounded by his staff on the field of Waterloo; and notwithstanding recent events which have, as it were, enveloped our great hero in a cloud, I will be bold to say—for a man in my line must not be blown about by political winds—that a finer subject—of the modern order, belonging to our own time and epoch—the understanding of man could hardly conceive; angels might, perhaps, but not men, sirs, not men."

"Who painted it?" said Mr. Powderell, much impressed.

"It is a proof before the letter, Mr. Powderell—the painter is not known," answered Trumbull with a certain gaspingness in his last words, after which he pursed up his lips and stared round him.

"I'll bid a pound!" said Mr. Powderell in a tone of resolved emotion, as of a man ready to put himself in the breach. Whether from awe or pity, nobody raised the price on him.

Next came two Dutch prints which Mr. Toller had been eager for, and after he had secured them he went away. Other

prints and afterwards some paintings were sold to leading Middlemarchers who had come with a special desire for them, and there was a more active movement of the audience in and out; some who had bought what they wanted going away, others coming in either quite newly or from a temporary visit to the refreshments which were spread under the marquee on the lawn. It was this marquee that Mr. Bambridge was bent on buying, and he appeared to like looking inside it frequently as a foretaste of its possession. On the last occasion of his return from it he was observed to bring with him a new companion, a stranger to Mr. Trumbull and everyone else, whose appearance, however, led to the supposition that he might be a relative of the horse-dealer's, also "given to indulgence." His large whiskers, imposing swagger, and swing of the leg made him a striking figure; but his suit of black, rather shabby at the edges, caused the prejudicial inference that he was not able to afford himself as much indulgence as he liked.

"Who is it you've picked up, Bam?" said Mr. Horrock, aside.

"Ask him yourself," returned Mr. Bambridge. "He said he'd just turned in from the road."

Mr. Horrock eyed the stranger, who was leaning back against his stick with one hand, using his toothpick with the other, and looking about him with a certain restlessness apparently under the silence imposed on him by circumstances.

At length the *Supper at Emmaus* was brought forward, to Will's immense relief, for he was getting so tired of the proceedings that he had drawn back a little and leaned his shoulder against the wall just behind the auctioneer. He now came forward again, and his eye caught the conspicuous stranger, who, rather to his surprise, was staring at him markedly. But Will was immediately appealed to by Mr. Trumbull.

"Yes, Mr. Ladislaw, yes; this interests you as a connois*sure*, I think. It is some pleasure," the auctioneer went on with a rising fervour, "to have a picture like this to show to a company of ladies and gentlemen—a picture worth any sum to an individual whose means were on a level with his judgement. It is a painting of the Italian school—by the celebrated *Guydo*, the greatest painter in the world, the chief of the Old Masters, as they are called—I take it, because they were up to a thing or two beyond most of us—in possession of secrets now lost to the bulk of mankind. Let me tell you, gentlemen, I have seen a great many pictures by the Old Masters, and they are not all up to this mark—some of them are darker than you might like, and not family subjects. But here is a *Guydo*—the frame alone is worth pounds—which any lady might be proud to hang up—a suitable thing for what we call a refectory in a charitable institution, if any gentleman of the corporation wished to show his munifi*cence*. Turn it a little, sir? Yes. Joseph, turn it a little towards Mr. Ladislaw—Mr. Ladislaw, having been abroad, understands the merit of these things, you observe."

All eyes were for a moment turned towards Will, who said, coolly, "Five pounds."

The auctioneer burst out in deep remonstrance, "Ah! Mr. Ladislaw! The frame alone is worth that. Ladies and gentlemen, for the credit of the town! Suppose it should be discovered hereafter that a gem of art has been amongst us in this town, and nobody in Middlemarch awake to it. Five guineas—five seven-six—five ten. Still, ladies, still! It is a gem, and 'Full many a gem,' as the poet says, has been allowed to go at a nominal price because the public knew no better, because it was offered in circles where there was—I was going to say a low feeling, but no! Six pounds—six guineas—a *Guydo* of the first order going at six guineas—it is an insult to religion, ladies; it touches us all as Christians, gentlemen, that a subject like this should go at such a low figure—six pounds ten—seven—"

The bidding was brisk, and Will continued to share in it, remembering that Mrs. Bulstrode had a strong wish for the picture and thinking that he might stretch the price to twelve pounds. But it was knocked down to him at ten guineas, whereupon he pushed his way towards the bow-window and went out. He chose to go under the marquee to get a glass of water, being hot and thirsty; it was empty of other visitors, and he asked the woman in attendance to fetch him some fresh water, but before she was well gone he was annoyed to see entering the florid stranger who had stared at him. It struck Will at this moment that the man might be one of those political parasitic insects of the bloated kind who had once or twice claimed acquaintance with him as having heard him speak on the reform question and who might think of getting a shilling by news. In this light his person, already rather heating to behold on a summer's day, appeared the more disagreeable; and Will, half seated on the elbow of a garden-chair, turned his eyes carefully away from the comer. But this signified little to our acquaintance Mr. Raffles, who never hesitated to thrust himself on unwilling observation if it suited his purpose to do so. He moved a step or two till he was in front of Will and said with full-mouthed haste, "Excuse me, Mr. Ladislaw—was your mother's name Sarah Dunkirk?"

Will, starting to his feet, moved backward a step, frowning, and saying with some fierceness, "Yes, sir, it was. And what is that to you?"

It was in Will's nature that the first spark it threw out was a direct answer of the question and a challenge of the consequences. To have said, "What is that to you?" in the first instance would have seemed like shuffling—as if he minded who knew anything about his origin!

Raffles on his side had not the same eagerness for a collision which was implied in Ladislaw's threatening air. The slim young fellow with his girl's complexion looked like a tiger-cat ready to spring on him. Under such circumstances Mr. Raffles's pleasure in annoying his company was kept in abeyance.

"No offence, my good sir, no offence! I only remember your mother—knew her when she was a girl. But it is your father that you feature, sir. I had the pleasure of seeing your father too. Parents alive, Mr. Ladislaw?"

"No!" thundered Will in the same attitude as before.

"Should be glad to do you a service, Mr. Ladislaw—by Jove, I should! Hope to meet again."

Hereupon Raffles, who had lifted his hat with the last words, turned himself round with a swing of his leg and walked away. Will looked after him a moment and could see that he did not re-enter the auction-room but appeared to be walking towards the road. For an instant he thought that he had been foolish not to let the man go on talking. But no! On the whole he preferred doing without knowledge from that source.

Later in the evening, however, Raffles overtook him in the street, and appearing either to have forgotten the roughness of his former reception or to intend avenging it by a forgiving familiarity, greeted him jovially and walked by his side, remarking at first on the pleasantness of the town and neighbourhood. Will suspected that the man had been drinking and was considering how to shake him off when Raffles said, "I've been abroad myself, Mr. Ladislaw—I've seen the world—

used to parley-vous a little. It was at Boulogne I saw your father—a most uncommon likeness you are of him, by Jove! Mouth—nose—eyes—hair turned off your brow just like his—a little in the foreign style. John Bull doesn't do much of that. But your father was very ill when I saw him. Lord, Lord! Hands you might see through. You were a small youngster then. Did he get well?"

"No," said Will curtly.

"Ah! Well! I've often wondered what became of your mother. She ran away from her friends when she was a young lass—a proud-spirited lass, and pretty, by Jove! *I* knew the reason why she ran away," said Raffles, winking slowly as he looked sideways at Will.

"You know nothing dishonourable of her, sir," said Will, turning on him rather savagely. But Mr. Raffles just now was not sensitive to shades of manner.

"Not a bit!" said he, tossing his head decisively. "She was a little too honourable to like her friends—that was it!" Here Raffles again winked slowly. "Lord bless you, I knew all about 'em—a little in what you may call the respectable thieving line—the high style of receiving-house—none of your holes and corners—first-rate. Slap-up shop, high profits and no mistake. But Lord! Sarah would have known nothing about it—a dashing young lady she was—fine boarding-school—fit for a lord's wife—only Archie Duncan threw it at her out of spite because she would have nothing to do with him. And so she ran away from the whole concern. I travelled for 'em, sir, in a gentlemanly way—at a high salary. They didn't mind her running away at first—godly folks, sir, very godly—and she was for the stage. The son was alive then, and the daughter was at a discount. Hallo! Here we are at the Blue Bull. What do you say, Mr. Ladislaw? Shall we turn in and have a glass?"

"No, I must say good evening," said Will, dashing up a passage which led into Lowick Gate and almost running to get out of Raffles's reach.

He walked a long while on the Lowick road away from the town, glad of the starlit darkness when it came. He felt as if he had had dirt cast on him amidst shouts of scorn. There was this to confirm the fellow's statement—that his mother never would tell him the reason why she had run away from her family.

Well! What was he, Will Ladislaw, the worse, supposing the truth about that family to be the ugliest? His mother had braved hardship in order to separate herself from it. But if Dorothea's friends had known this story—if the Chettams had known it—they would have had a fine colour to give their suspicions, a welcome ground for thinking him unfit to come near her. However, let them suspect what they pleased, they would find themselves in the wrong. They would find out that the blood in his veins was as free from the taint of meanness as theirs.

CHAPTER 61

"Inconsistencies," answered Imlac, "cannot both be right, but imputed to man they may both be true."
—*Rasselas*

The same night, when Mr. Bulstrode returned from a journey to Brassing on business, his good wife met him in the entrance-hall and drew him into his private sitting-room.

"Nicholas," she said, fixing her honest eyes upon him anxiously, "there has been such a disagreeable man here asking for you—it has made me quite uncomfortable."

"What kind of man, my dear," said Mr. Bulstrode, dreadfully certain of the answer.

"A red-faced man with large whiskers, and most impudent in his manner. He declared he was an old friend of yours and said you would be sorry not to see him. He wanted to wait for you here, but I told him he could see you at the bank tomorrow morning. Most impudent he was! Stared at me and said his friend Nick had luck in wives. I don't believe he would have gone away if Blucher had not happened to break his chain and come running round on the gravel—for I was in the garden; so I said, 'You'd better go away—the dog is very fierce, and I can't hold him.' Do you really know anything of such a man?"

"I believe I know who he is, my dear," said Mr. Bulstrode in his usual subdued voice, "an unfortunate, dissolute wretch whom I helped too much in days gone by. However, I presume you will not be troubled by him again. He will probably come to the bank—to beg, doubtless."

No more was said on the subject until the next day, when Mr. Bulstrode had returned from the town and was dressing for dinner. His wife, not sure that he was come home, looked into his dressing-room and saw him with his coat and cravat off, leaning one arm on a chest of drawers and staring absently at the ground. He started nervously and looked up as she entered.

"You look very ill, Nicholas. Is there anything the matter?"

"I have a good deal of pain in my head," said Mr. Bulstrode, who was so frequently ailing that his wife was always ready to believe in this cause of depression.

"Sit down and let me sponge it with vinegar."

Physically Mr. Bulstrode did not want the vinegar, but morally the affectionate attention soothed him. Though always polite, it was his habit to receive such services with marital coolness as his wife's duty. But today, while she was bending over him, he said, "You are very good, Harriet," in a tone which had something new in it to her ear; she did not know exactly what the novelty was, but her woman's solicitude shaped itself into a darting thought that he might be going to have an illness.

"Has anything worried you?" she said. "Did that man come to you at the bank?"

"Yes; it was as I had supposed. He is a man who at one time might have done better. But he has sunk into a drunken, debauched creature."

"Is he quite gone away?" said Mrs. Bulstrode anxiously; but for certain reasons she refrained from adding, "It was very disagreeable to hear him calling himself a friend of yours." At that moment she would not have liked to say anything which implied her habitual consciousness that her husband's earlier connexions were not quite on a level with her own. Not that she knew much about them. That her husband had first been employed in a bank, that he had afterwards entered into what he called city business and gained a fortune before he was three-and-thirty, that he had married a widow who was much older than himself—a dissenter, and in other ways probably of that disadvantageous quality usually perceptible in a first wife if inquired into with the dispassionate judgement of a second—was almost as much as she had cared to learn beyond the glimpses which Mr. Bulstrode's narrative occasionally gave of his early bent towards religion, his inclination to be a preacher, and his association with missionary and philanthropic efforts. She believed in him as an excellent man whose piety carried a peculiar eminence in belonging to a layman, whose influence had turned her own mind towards seriousness, and whose share of perishable good had been the means of raising her own position. But she also liked to think that it was well in every sense for Mr. Bulstrode to have won the hand of Harriet Vincy, whose family was undeniable in a Middlemarch light—a better light surely than any thrown in London thoroughfares or dissenting chapel-yards. The unreformed provincial mind distrusted London; and while true religion was everywhere saving, honest Mrs. Bulstrode was convinced that to be saved in the Church was more respectable. She so much wished to ignore towards others that her husband had ever been a London dissenter, that she liked to keep it out of sight even in talking to him. He was quite aware of this; indeed in some respects he was rather afraid of this ingenuous wife, whose imitative piety and native worldliness were equally sincere, who had nothing to be ashamed of, and whom he had married out of a thorough inclination still subsisting. But his fears were such as belong to a man who cares to maintain his recognized supremacy: the loss of high consideration from his wife, as from everyone else who did not clearly hate him out of enmity to the truth, would be as the beginning of death to him. When she said, "Is he quite gone away?"

"Oh, I trust so," he answered, with an effort to throw as much sober unconcern into his tone as possible.

But in truth Mr. Bulstrode was very far from a state of quiet trust. In the interview at the bank, Raffles had made it

evident that his eagerness to torment was almost as strong in him as any other greed. He had frankly said that he had turned out of the way to come to Middlemarch, just to look about him and see whether the neighbourhood would suit him to live in. He had certainly had a few debts to pay more than he expected, but the two hundred pounds were not gone yet: a cool five-and-twenty would suffice him to go away with for the present. What he had wanted chiefly was to see his friend Nick and family, and know all about the prosperity of a man to whom he was so much attached. By and by he might come back for a longer stay. This time Raffles declined to be "seen off the premises," as he expressed it—declined to quit Middlemarch under Bulstrode's eyes. He meant to go by coach the next day—if he chose.

Bulstrode felt himself helpless. Neither threats nor coaxing could avail; he could not count on any persistent fear nor on any promise. On the contrary, he felt a cold certainty at his heart that Raffles—unless Providence sent death to hinder him—would come back to Middlemarch before long. And that certainty was a terror.

It was not that he was in danger of legal punishment or of beggary; he was in danger only of seeing disclosed to the judgement of his neighbours and the mournful perception of his wife certain facts of his past life which would render him an object of scorn and an opprobrium of the religion with which he had diligently associated himself. The terror of being judged sharpens the memory: it sends an inevitable glare over that long-unvisited past which has been habitually recalled only in general phrases. Even without memory, the life is bound into one by a zone of dependence in growth and decay; but intense memory forces a man to own his blameworthy past. With memory set smarting like a reopened wound, a man's past is not simply a dead history, an outworn preparation of the present; it is not a repented error shaken loose from the life; it is a still quivering part of himself, bringing shudders and bitter flavours and the tinglings of a merited shame.

Into this second life Bulstrode's past had now risen, only the pleasures of it seeming to have lost their quality. Night and day, without interruption save of brief sleep which only wove retrospect and fear into a fantastic present, he felt the scenes of his earlier life coming between him and everything else, as obstinately as when we look through the window from a lighted room, the objects we turn our backs on are still before us, instead of the grass and the trees. The successive events inward and outward were there in one view; though each might be dwelt on in turn, the rest still kept their hold in the consciousness.

Once more he saw himself the young banker's clerk, with an agreeable person, as clever in figures as he was fluent in speech and fond of theological definition: an eminent though young member of a Calvinistic dissenting church at Highbury, having had striking experience in conviction of sin and sense of pardon. Again he heard himself called for as Brother Bulstrode in prayer meetings, speaking on religious platforms, preaching in private houses. Again he felt himself thinking of the ministry as possibly his vocation, and inclined towards missionary labour. That was the happiest time of his life; that was the spot he would have chosen now to awake in and find the rest a dream. The people among whom Brother Bulstrode was distinguished were very few, but they were very near to him and stirred his satisfaction the more; his power stretched through a narrow space, but he felt its effect the more intensely. He believed without effort in the peculiar work of grace within him and in the signs that God intended him for special instrumentality.

Then came the moment of transition; it was with the sense of promotion he had when he, an orphan educated at a commercial charity-school, was invited to a fine villa belonging to Mr. Dunkirk, the richest man in the congregation. Soon he became an intimate there, honoured for his piety by the wife, marked out for his ability by the husband, whose wealth was due to a flourishing city and west-end trade. That was the setting-in of a new current for his ambition, directing his prospects of "instrumentality" towards the uniting of distinguished religious gifts with successful business.

By and by came a decided external leading: a confidential subordinate partner died, and nobody seemed to the principal so well fitted to fill the severely felt vacancy as his young friend Bulstrode, if he would become confidential accountant. The offer was accepted. The business was a pawnbroker's, of the most magnificent sort both in extent and profits; and on a short acquaintance with it Bulstrode became aware that one source of magnificent profit was the easy reception of any goods offered, without strict inquiry as to where they came from. But there was a branch house at the west end, and no pettiness or dinginess to give suggestions of shame.

He remembered his first moments of shrinking. They were private and were filled with arguments, some of these taking the form of prayer. The business was established and had old roots; is it not one thing to set up a new gin-palace and another to accept an investment in an old one? The profits made out of lost souls—where can the line be drawn at which they begin in human transactions? Was it not even God's way of saving His chosen? "Thou knowest"—the young Bulstrode had said then, as the older Bulstrode was saying now—"Thou knowest how loose my soul sits from these things, how I view them all as implements for tilling Thy garden rescued here and there from the wilderness."

Metaphors and precedents were not wanting; peculiar spiritual experiences were not wanting which at last made the retention of his position seem a service demanded of him: the vista of a fortune had already opened itself, and Bulstrode's shrinking remained private. Mr. Dunkirk had never expected that there would be any shrinking at all; he had never conceived that trade had anything to do with the scheme of salvation. And it was true that Bulstrode found himself carrying on two distinct lives; his religious activity could not be incompatible with his business as soon as he had argued himself into not feeling it incompatible.

Mentally surrounded with that past again, Bulstrode had the same pleas—indeed, the years had been perpetually spinning them into intricate thickness, like masses of spider-web, padding the moral sensibility; nay, as age made egoism more eager but less enjoying, his soul had become more saturated with the belief that he did everything for God's sake, being indifferent to it for his own. And yet—if he could be back in that far-off spot with his youthful poverty—why, then he would choose to be a missionary.

But the train of causes in which he had locked himself went on. There was trouble in the fine villa at Highbury. Years before, the only daughter had run away, defied her parents, and gone on the stage; and now the only boy died, and after a short time Mr. Dunkirk died also. The wife, a simple pious woman, left with all the wealth in and out of the magnificent trade, of which she never knew the precise nature, had come to believe in Bulstrode and innocently adore him as women often adore their priest or "man-made" minister. It was natural that after a time marriage should have been thought of between them. But Mrs. Dunkirk had qualms and yearnings about her daughter, who had long been regarded as lost both

to God and her parents. It was known that the daughter had married, but she was utterly gone out of sight. The mother, having lost her boy, imagined a grandson and wished in a double sense to reclaim her daughter. If she were found, there would be a channel for property, perhaps a wide one, in the provision for several grandchildren. Efforts to find her must be made before Mrs. Dunkirk would marry again. Bulstrode concurred; but after advertisement as well as other modes of inquiry had been tried, the mother believed that her daughter was not to be found and consented to marry without reservation of property.

The daughter had been found, but only one man besides Bulstrode knew it, and he was paid for keeping silence and carrying himself away.

That was the bare fact which Bulstrode was now forced to see in the rigid outline with which acts present themselves to onlookers. But for himself at that distant time, and even now in burning memory, the fact was broken into little sequences, each justified as it came by reasonings which seemed to prove it righteous. Bulstrode's course up to that time had, he thought, been sanctioned by remarkable providences, appearing to point the way for him to be the agent in making the best use of a large property and withdrawing it from perversion. Death and other striking dispositions, such as feminine trustfulness, had come; and Bulstrode would have adopted Cromwell's words—"Do you call these bare events? The Lord pity you!" The events were comparatively small, but the essential condition was there, namely, that they were in favour of his own ends. It was easy for him to settle what was due from him to others by inquiring what were God's intentions with regard to himself. Could it be for God's service that this fortune should in any considerable proportion go to a young woman and her husband who were given up to the lightest pursuits and might scatter it abroad in triviality—people who seemed to lie outside the path of remarkable providences? Bulstrode had never said to himself beforehand, "The daughter shall not be found"; nevertheless, when the moment came he kept her existence hidden, and when other moments followed, he soothed the mother with consolation in the probability that the unhappy young woman might be no more.

There were hours in which Bulstrode felt that his action was unrighteous, but how could he go back? He had mental exercises, called himself nought, laid hold on redemption, and went on in his course of instrumentality. And after five years Death again came to widen his path by taking away his wife. He did gradually withdraw his capital, but he did not make the sacrifices requisite to put an end to the business, which was carried on for thirteen years afterwards before it finally collapsed. Meanwhile Nicholas Bulstrode had used his hundred thousand discreetly and was become provincially, solidly important—a banker, a churchman, a public benefactor; also a sleeping partner in trading concerns, in which his ability was directed to economy in the raw material, as in the case of the dyes which rotted Mr. Vincy's silk. And now, when this respectability had lasted undisturbed for nearly thirty years—when all that preceded it had long lain benumbed in the consciousness—that past had risen and immersed his thought as if with the terrible irruption of a new sense overburdening the feeble being.

Meanwhile, in his conversation with Raffles, he had learned something momentous, something which entered actively into the struggle of his longings and terrors. There, he thought, lay an opening towards spiritual, perhaps towards material, rescue.

The spiritual kind of rescue was a genuine need with him. There may be coarse hypocrites, who consciously affect beliefs and emotions for the sake of gulling the world, but Bulstrode was not one of them. He was simply a man whose desires had been stronger than his theoretic beliefs and who had gradually explained the gratification of his desires into satisfactory agreement with those beliefs. If this be hypocrisy, it is a process which shows itself occasionally in us all, to whatever confession we belong, and whether we believe in the future perfection of our race or in the nearest date fixed for the end of the world; whether we regard the earth as a putrefying nidus for a saved remnant, including ourselves, or have a passionate belief in the solidarity of mankind.

The service he could do to the cause of religion had been through life the ground he alleged to himself for his choice of action: it had been the motive which he had poured out in his prayers. Who would use money and position better than he meant to use them? Who could surpass him in self-abhorrence and exaltation of God's cause? And to Mr. Bulstrode God's cause was something distinct from his own rectitude of conduct; it enforced a discrimination of God's enemies, who were to be used merely as instruments and whom it would be as well if possible to keep out of money and consequent influence. Also, profitable investments in trades where the power of the prince of this world showed its most active devices became sanctified by a right application of the profits in the hands of God's servant.

This implicit reasoning is essentially no more peculiar to evangelical belief than the use of wide phrases for narrow motives is peculiar to Englishmen. There is no general doctrine which is not capable of eating out our morality if unchecked by the deep-seated habit of direct fellow-feeling with individual fellow-men.

But a man who believes in something else than his own greed has necessarily a conscience or standard to which he more or less adapts himself. Bulstrode's standard had been his serviceableness to God's cause: "I am sinful and nought—a vessel to be consecrated by use—but use me!" had been the mould into which he had constrained his immense need of being something important and predominating. And now had come a moment in which that mould seemed in danger of being broken and utterly cast away.

What if the acts he had reconciled himself to because they made him a stronger instrument of the divine glory were to become the pretext of the scoffer, and a darkening of that glory? If this were to be the ruling of Providence, he was cast out from the temple as one who had brought unclean offerings.

He had long poured out utterances of repentance. But today a repentance had come which was of a bitterer flavour, and a threatening Providence urged him to a kind of propitiation which was not simply a doctrinal transaction. The divine tribunal had changed its aspect for him; self-prostration was no longer enough, and he must bring restitution in his hand. It was really before his God that Bulstrode was about to attempt such restitution as seemed possible; a great dread had seized his susceptible frame, and the scorching approach of shame wrought in him a new spiritual need. Night and day, while the resurgent threatening past was making a conscience within him, he was thinking by what means he could recover peace and trust—by what sacrifice he could stay the rod. His belief in these moments of dread was that if he spontaneously did something right, God would save him from the consequences of wrong-doing. For religion can only change when the

emotions which fill it are changed, and the religion of personal fear remains nearly at the level of the savage.

He had seen Raffles actually going away on the Brassing coach, and this was a temporary relief; it removed the pressure of an immediate dread, but did not put an end to the spiritual conflict and the need to win protection. At last he came to a difficult resolve and wrote a letter to Will Ladislaw, begging him to be at the Shrubs that evening for a private interview at nine o'clock. Will had felt no particular surprise at the request and connected it with some new notions about the *Pioneer*; but when he was shown into Mr. Bulstrode's private room, he was struck with the painfully worn look on the banker's face, and was going to say, "Are you ill?" when, checking himself in that abruptness, he only inquired after Mrs. Bulstrode and her satisfaction with the picture bought for her.

"Thank you, she is quite satisfied; she has gone out with her daughters this evening. I begged you to come, Mr. Ladislaw, because I have a communication of a very private—indeed, I will say, of a sacredly confidential—nature, which I desire to make to you. Nothing, I dare say, has been farther from your thoughts than that there had been important ties in the past which could connect your history with mine."

Will felt something like an electric shock. He was already in a state of keen sensitiveness and hardly allayed agitation on the subject of ties in the past, and his presentiments were not agreeable. It seemed like the fluctuations of a dream, as if the action begun by that loud, bloated stranger were being carried on by this pale-eyed, sickly looking piece of respectability whose subdued tone and glib formality of speech were at this moment almost as repulsive to him as their remembered contrast. He answered with a marked change of colour, "No, indeed, nothing."

"You see before you, Mr. Ladislaw, a man who is deeply stricken. But for the urgency of conscience and the knowledge that I am before the bar of One who seeth not as man seeth, I should be under no compulsion to make the disclosure which has been my object in asking you to come here tonight. So far as human laws go, you have no claim on me whatever."

Will was even more uncomfortable than wondering. Mr. Bulstrode had paused, leaning his head on his hand and looking at the floor. But he now fixed his examining glance on Will and said, "I am told that your mother's name was Sarah Dunkirk and that she ran away from her friends to go on the stage. Also, that your father was at one time much emaciated by illness. May I ask if you can confirm these statements?"

"Yes, they are all true," said Will, struck with the order in which an inquiry had come that might have been expected to be preliminary to the banker's previous hints. But Mr. Bulstrode had tonight followed the order of his emotions; he entertained no doubt that the opportunity for restitution had come, and he had an overpowering impulse towards the penitential expression by which he was deprecating chastisement.

"Do you know any particulars of your mother's family?" he continued.

"No; she never liked to speak of them. She was a very generous, honourable woman," said Will almost angrily.

"I do not wish to allege anything against her. Did she never mention her mother to you at all?"

"I have heard her say that she thought her mother did not know the reason of her running away. She said 'Poor Mother' in a pitying tone."

"That mother became my wife," said Bulstrode, and then paused a moment before he added, "You have a claim on me, Mr. Ladislaw: as I said before, not a legal claim, but one which my conscience recognizes. I was enriched by that marriage—a result which would probably not have taken place—certainly not to the same extent—if your grandmother could have discovered her daughter. That daughter, I gather, is no longer living!"

"No," said Will, feeling suspicion and repugnance rising so strongly within him that without quite knowing what he did, he took his hat from the floor and stood up. The impulse within him was to reject the disclosed connexion.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Ladislaw," said Bulstrode anxiously. "Doubtless you are startled by the suddenness of this discovery. But I entreat your patience with one who is already bowed down by inward trial."

Will reseated himself, feeling some pity which was half contempt for this voluntary self-abasement of an elderly man.

"It is my wish, Mr. Ladislaw, to make amends for the deprivation which befell your mother. I know that you are without fortune, and I wish to supply you adequately from a store which would have probably already been yours had your grandmother been certain of your mother's existence and been able to find her."

Mr. Bulstrode paused. He felt that he was performing a striking piece of scrupulosity in the judgement of his auditor and a penitential act in the eyes of God. He had no clue to the state of Will Ladislaw's mind, smarting as it was from the clear hints of Raffles, and with its natural quickness in construction stimulated by the expectation of discoveries which he would have been glad to conjure back into darkness. Will made no answer for several moments, till Mr. Bulstrode, who at the end of his speech had cast his eyes on the floor, now raised them with an examining glance, which Will met fully, saying, "I suppose you did know of my mother's existence and knew where she might have been found."

Bulstrode shrank; there was a visible quivering in his face and hands. He was totally unprepared to have his advances met in this way or to find himself urged into more revelation than he had beforehand set down as needful. But at that moment he dared not tell a lie, and he felt suddenly uncertain of his ground, which he had trodden with some confidence before.

"I will not deny that you conjecture rightly," he answered with a faltering in his tone. "And I wish to make atonement to you as the one still remaining who has suffered a loss through me. You enter, I trust, into my purpose, Mr. Ladislaw, which has a reference to higher than merely human claims, and as I have already said, is entirely independent of any legal compulsion. I am ready to narrow my own resources and the prospects of my family by binding myself to allow you five hundred pounds yearly during my life and to leave you a proportional capital at my death—nay, to do still more, if more should be definitely necessary to any laudable project on your part." Mr. Bulstrode had gone on to particulars in the expectation that these would work strongly on Ladislaw and merge other feelings in grateful acceptance.

But Will was looking as stubborn as possible, with his lip pouting and his fingers in his side pockets. He was not in the least touched and said firmly, "Before I make any reply to your proposition, Mr. Bulstrode, I must beg you to answer a question or two. Were you connected with the business by which that fortune you speak of was originally made?"

Mr. Bulstrode's thought was, "Raffles has told him." How could he refuse to answer when he had volunteered what drew forth the question? He answered, "Yes."

“And was that business—or was it not—a thoroughly dishonourable one—nay, one that, if its nature had been made public, might have ranked those concerned in it with thieves and convicts?”

Will’s tone had a cutting bitterness; he was moved to put his question as nakedly as he could.

Bulstrode reddened with irrepressible anger. He had been prepared for a scene of self-abasement, but his intense pride and his habit of supremacy overpowered penitence and even dread when this young man, whom he had meant to benefit, turned on him with the air of a judge.

“The business was established before I became connected with it, sir; nor is it for you to institute an inquiry of that kind,” he answered, not raising his voice, but speaking with quick defiantness.

“Yes, it is,” said Will, starting up again with his hat in his hand. “It is eminently mine to ask such questions when I have to decide whether I will have transactions with you and accept your money. My unblemished honour is important to me. It is important to me to have no stain on my birth and connexions. And now I find there is a stain which I can’t help. My mother felt it and tried to keep as clear of it as she could, and so will I. You shall keep your ill-gotten money. If I had any fortune of my own, I would willingly pay it to anyone who could disprove what you have told me. What I have to thank you for is that you kept the money till now, when I can refuse it. It ought to lie with a man’s self that he is a gentleman. Good-night, sir.”

Bulstrode was going to speak, but Will with determined quickness was out of the room in an instant, and in another the hall-door had closed behind him. He was too strongly possessed with passionate rebellion against this inherited blot which had been thrust on his knowledge to reflect at present whether he had not been too hard on Bulstrode—too arrogantly merciless towards a man of sixty, who was making efforts at retrieval when time had rendered them vain.

No third person listening could have thoroughly understood the impetuosity of Will’s repulse or the bitterness of his words. No one but himself then knew how everything connected with the sentiment of his own dignity had an immediate bearing for him on his relation to Dorothea and to Mr. Casaubon’s treatment of him. And in the rush of impulses by which he flung back that offer of Bulstrode’s, there was mingled the sense that it would have been impossible for him ever to tell Dorothea that he had accepted it.

As for Bulstrode—when Will was gone he suffered a violent reaction and wept like a woman. It was the first time he had encountered an open expression of scorn from any man higher than Raffles; and with that scorn hurrying like venom through his system, there was no sensibility left to consolations. But the relief of weeping had to be checked. His wife and daughters soon came home from hearing the address of an Oriental missionary and were full of regret that Papa had not heard, in the first instance, the interesting things which they tried to repeat to him.

Perhaps, through all other hidden thoughts, the one that breathed most comfort was that Will Ladislaw at least was not likely to publish what had taken place that evening.

CHAPTER 62

He was a squyer of lowe degre,
That loved the king's daughter of Hungrie.

—OLD ROMANCE

Will Ladislaw's mind was now wholly bent on seeing Dorothea again and forthwith quitting Middlemarch. The morning after his agitating scene with Bulstrode he wrote a brief letter to her, saying that various causes had detained him in the neighbourhood longer than he had expected and asking her permission to call again at Lowick at some hour which she would mention on the earliest possible day, he being anxious to depart, but unwilling to do so until she had granted him an interview. He left the letter at the office, ordering the messenger to carry it to Lowick Manor and wait for an answer.

Ladislaw felt the awkwardness of asking for more last words. His former farewell had been made in the hearing of Sir James Chettam and had been announced as final even to the butler. It is certainly trying to a man's dignity to reappear when he is not expected to do so: a first farewell has pathos in it, but to come back for a second lends an opening to comedy, and it was possible even that there might be bitter sneers afloat about Will's motives for lingering. Still it was on the whole more satisfactory to his feeling to take the directest means of seeing Dorothea than to use any device which might give an air of chance to a meeting of which he wished her to understand that it was what he earnestly sought. When he had parted from her before, he had been in ignorance of facts which gave a new aspect to the relation between them and made a more absolute severance than he had then believed in. He knew nothing of Dorothea's private fortune, and being little used to reflect on such matters, took it for granted that according to Mr. Casaubon's arrangement marriage to him, Will Ladislaw, would mean that she consented to be penniless. That was not what he could wish for even in his secret heart, or even if she had been ready to meet such hard contrast for his sake. And then, too, there was the fresh smart of that disclosure about his mother's family, which if known would be an added reason why Dorothea's friends should look down upon him as utterly below her. The secret hope that after some years he might come back with the sense that he had at least a personal value equal to her wealth seemed now the dreamy continuation of a dream. This change would surely justify him in asking Dorothea to receive him once more.

But Dorothea on that morning was not at home to receive Will's note. In consequence of a letter from her uncle announcing his intention to be at home in a week, she had driven first to Freshitt to carry the news, meaning to go on to the Grange to deliver some orders with which her uncle had intrusted her—thinking, as he said, "a little mental occupation of this sort good for a widow."

If Will Ladislaw could have overheard some of the talk at Freshitt that morning, he would have felt all his suppositions confirmed as to the readiness of certain people to sneer at his lingering in the neighbourhood. Sir James, indeed, though much relieved concerning Dorothea, had been on the watch to learn Ladislaw's movements and had an instructed informant in Mr. Standish, who was necessarily in his confidence on this matter. That Ladislaw had stayed in Middlemarch nearly two months after he had declared that he was going immediately was a fact to embitter Sir James's suspicions, or at least to justify his aversion to a "young fellow" whom he represented to himself as slight, volatile, and likely enough to show such recklessness as naturally went along with a position unriveted by family ties or a strict profession. But he had just heard something from Standish which, while it justified these surmises about Will, offered a means of nullifying all danger with regard to Dorothea.

Unwonted circumstances may make us all rather unlike ourselves; there are conditions under which the most majestic person is obliged to sneeze, and our emotions are liable to be acted on in the same incongruous manner. Good Sir James was this morning so far unlike himself that he was irritably anxious to say something to Dorothea on a subject which he usually avoided as if it had been a matter of shame to them both. He could not use Celia as a medium because he did not choose that she should know the kind of gossip he had in his mind; and before Dorothea happened to arrive he had been trying to imagine how, with his shyness and unready tongue, he could ever manage to introduce his communication. Her unexpected presence brought him to utter hopelessness in his own power of saying anything unpleasant, but desperation suggested a resource; he sent the groom on an unsaddled horse across the park with a pencilled note to Mrs. Cadwallader, who already knew the gossip and would think it no compromise of herself to repeat it as often as required.

Dorothea was detained on the good pretext that Mr. Garth, whom she wanted to see, was expected at the hall within the hour, and she was still talking to Caleb on the gravel when Sir James, on the watch for the rector's wife, saw her coming and met her with the needful hints.

"Enough! I understand," said Mrs. Cadwallader. "You shall be innocent. I am such a blackamoor that I cannot smirch myself."

"I don't mean that it's of any consequence," said Sir James, disliking that Mrs. Cadwallader should understand too much. "Only it is desirable that Dorothea should know there are reasons why she should not receive him again, and I really can't say so to her. It will come lightly from you."

It came very lightly indeed. When Dorothea quitted Caleb and turned to meet them, it appeared that Mrs. Cadwallader had stepped across the park by the merest chance in the world just to chat with Celia in a matronly way about the baby. And so Mr. Brooke was coming back? Delightful! Coming back, it was to be hoped, quite cured of parliamentary fever and

pioneering. Apropos of the *Pioneer*, somebody had prophesied that it would soon be like a dying dolphin and turn all colours for want of knowing how to help itself, because Mr. Brooke's *protégé*, the brilliant young Ladislaw, was gone or going. Had Sir James heard that?

The three were walking along the gravel slowly, and Sir James, turning aside to whip a shrub, said he had heard something of that sort.

"All false!" said Mrs. Cadwallader. "He is not gone, or going, apparently; the *Pioneer* keeps its colour, and Mr. Orlando Ladislaw is making a sad dark-blue scandal by warbling continually with your Mr. Lydgate's wife, who they tell me is as pretty as pretty can be. It seems nobody ever goes into the house without finding this young gentleman lying on the rug or warbling at the piano. But the people in manufacturing towns are always disreputable."

"You began by saying that one report was false, Mrs. Cadwallader, and I believe this is false too," said Dorothea with indignant energy; "at least, I feel sure it is a misrepresentation. I will not hear any evil spoken of Mr. Ladislaw; he has already suffered too much injustice."

Dorothea when thoroughly moved cared little what anyone thought of her feelings; and even if she had been able to reflect, she would have held it petty to keep silence at injurious words about Will from fear of being herself misunderstood. Her face was flushed and her lip trembled.

Sir James, glancing at her, repented of his stratagem; but Mrs. Cadwallader, equal to all occasions, spread the palms of her hands outward and said, "Heaven grant it, my dear! I mean that all bad tales about anybody may be false. But it is a pity that young Lydgate should have married one of these Middlemarch girls. Considering he's a son of somebody, he might have got a woman with good blood in her veins, and not too young, who would have put up with his profession. There's Clara Harfager, for instance, whose friends don't know what to do with her; and she has a portion. Then we might have had her among us. However! It's no use being wise for other people. Where is Celia? Pray let us go in."

"I am going on immediately to Tipton," said Dorothea rather haughtily. "Good-bye."

Sir James could say nothing as he accompanied her to the carriage. He was altogether discontented with the result of a contrivance which had cost him some secret humiliation beforehand.

Dorothea drove along between the berried hedgerows and the shorn cornfields, not seeing or hearing anything around. The tears came and rolled down her cheeks, but she did not know it. The world, it seemed, was turning ugly and hateful, and there was no place for her trustfulness. "It is not true—it is not true!" was the voice within her that she listened to; but all the while a remembrance to which there had always clung a vague uneasiness would thrust itself on her attention—the remembrance of that day when she had found Will Ladislaw with Mrs. Lydgate and had heard his voice accompanied by the piano.

"He said he would never do anything that I disapproved—I wish I could have told him that I disapproved of that," said poor Dorothea inwardly, feeling a strange alternation between anger with Will and the passionate defence of him. "They all try to blacken him before me, but I will care for no pain if he is not to blame. I always believed he was good." These were her last thoughts before she felt that the carriage was passing under the archway of the lodge-gate at the Grange, when she hurriedly pressed her handkerchief to her face and began to think of her errands. The coachman begged leave to take out the horses for half an hour as there was something wrong with a shoe; and Dorothea, having the sense that she was going to rest, took off her gloves and bonnet while she was leaning against a statue in the entrance-hall and talking to the housekeeper. At last she said, "I must stay here a little, Mrs. Kell. I will go into the library and write you some memoranda from my uncle's letter if you will open the shutters for me."

"The shutters are open, Madam," said Mrs. Kell, following Dorothea, who had walked along as she spoke. "Mr. Ladislaw is there, looking for something."

(Will had come to fetch a portfolio of his own sketches which he had missed in the act of packing his movables and did not choose to leave behind.)

Dorothea's heart seemed to turn over as if it had had a blow, but she was not perceptibly checked; in truth, the sense that Will was there was for the moment all-satisfying to her, like the sight of something precious that one has lost. When she reached the door she said to Mrs. Kell, "Go in first and tell him that I am here."

Will had found his portfolio and had laid it on the table at the far end of the room to turn over the sketches and please himself by looking at the memorable piece of art which had a relation to nature too mysterious for Dorothea. He was smiling at it still and shaking the sketches into order with the thought that he might find a letter from her awaiting him at Middlemarch, when Mrs. Kell close to his elbow said, "Mrs. Casaubon is coming in, sir."

Will turned round quickly, and the next moment Dorothea was entering. As Mrs. Kell closed the door behind her they met; each was looking at the other, and consciousness was overflowed by something that suppressed utterance. It was not confusion that kept them silent, for they both felt that parting was near, and there is no shamefacedness in a sad parting.

She moved automatically towards her uncle's chair against the writing-table, and Will, after drawing it out a little for her, went a few paces off and stood opposite to her.

"Pray sit down," said Dorothea, crossing her hands on her lap; "I am very glad you were here." Will thought that her face looked just as it did when she first shook hands with him in Rome, for her widow's cap, fixed in her bonnet, had gone off with it, and he could see that she had lately been shedding tears. But the mixture of anger in her agitation had vanished at the sight of him; she had been used, when they were face to face, always to feel confidence and the happy freedom which comes with mutual understanding, and how could other people's words hinder that effect on a sudden? Let the music which can take possession of our frame and fill the air with joy for us sound once more—what does it signify that we heard it found fault with in its absence?

"I have sent a letter to Lowick Manor today asking leave to see you," said Will, seating himself opposite to her. "I am going away immediately, and I could not go without speaking to you again."

"I thought we had parted when you came to Lowick many weeks ago—you thought you were going then," said Dorothea, her voice trembling a little.

"Yes; but I was in ignorance then of things which I know now—things which have altered my feelings about the future.

When I saw you before, I was dreaming that I might come back some day. I don't think I ever shall—now." Will paused here.

"You wished me to know the reason?" said Dorothea timidly.

"Yes," said Will impetuously, shaking his head backward and looking away from her with irritation in his face. "Of course I must wish it. I have been grossly insulted in your eyes and in the eyes of others. There has been a mean implication against my character. I wish you to know that under no circumstances would I have lowered myself by—under no circumstances would I have given men the chance of saying that I sought money under the pretext of seeking—something else. There was no need of other safeguard against me; the safeguard of wealth was enough."

Will rose from his chair with the last word and went—he hardly knew where; but it was to the projecting window nearest him, which had been open as now about the same season a year ago when he and Dorothea had stood within it and talked together. Her whole heart was going out at this moment in sympathy with Will's indignation; she only wanted to convince him that she had never done him injustice, and he seemed to have turned away from her as if she too had been part of the unfriendly world.

"It would be very unkind of you to suppose that I ever attributed any meanness to you," she began. Then in her ardent way, wanting to plead with him, she moved from her chair and went in front of him to her old place in the window, saying, "Do you suppose that I ever disbelieved in you?"

When Will saw her there, he gave a start and moved backward out of the window without meeting her glance. Dorothea was hurt by this movement following up the previous anger of his tone. She was ready to say that it was as hard on her as on him and that she was helpless, but those strange particulars of their relation which neither of them could explicitly mention kept her always in dread of saying too much. At this moment she had no belief that Will would in any case have wanted to marry her, and she feared using words which might imply such a belief. She only said earnestly, recurring to his last word, "I am sure no safeguard was ever needed against you."

Will did not answer. In the stormy fluctuation of his feelings these words of hers seemed to him cruelly neutral, and he looked pale and miserable after his angry outburst. He went to the table and fastened up his portfolio, while Dorothea looked at him from the distance. They were wasting these last moments together in wretched silence. What could he say, since what had got obstinately uppermost in his mind was the passionate love for her which he forbade himself to utter? What could she say, since she might offer him no help, since she was forced to keep the money that ought to have been his, since today he seemed not to respond as he used to do to her thorough trust and liking?

But Will at last turned away from his portfolio and approached the window again.

"I must go," he said with that peculiar look of the eyes which sometimes accompanies bitter feeling, as if they had been tired and burned with gazing too close at a light.

"What shall you do in life?" said Dorothea timidly. "Have your intentions remained just the same as when we said good-bye before?"

"Yes," said Will in a tone that seemed to waive the subject as uninteresting, "I shall work away at the first thing that offers. I suppose one gets a habit of doing without happiness or hope."

"Oh, what sad words!" said Dorothea with a dangerous tendency to sob. Then trying to smile, she added, "We used to argue that we were alike in speaking too strongly."

"I have not spoken too strongly now," said Will, leaning back against the angle of the wall. "There are certain things which a man can only go through once in his life, and he must know some time or other that the best is over with him. This experience has happened to me while I am very young—that is all. What I care more for than I can ever care for anything else is absolutely forbidden to me; I don't mean merely by being out of my reach, but forbidden me, even if it were within my reach, by my own pride and honour, by everything I respect myself for. Of course I shall go on living as a man might do who has seen heaven in a trance."

Will paused, imagining that it would be impossible for Dorothea to misunderstand this; indeed he felt that he was contradicting himself and offending against his self-approval in speaking to her so plainly; but still—it could not be fairly called wooing a woman to tell her that he would never woo her. It must be admitted to be a ghostly kind of wooing.

But Dorothea's mind was rapidly going over the past with quite another vision than his. The thought that she herself might be what Will most cared for did throb through her an instant, but then came doubt: the memory of the little they had lived through together turned pale and shrank before the memory which suggested how much fuller might have been the intercourse between Will and someone else with whom he had had constant companionship. Everything he had said might refer to that other relation, and whatever had passed between him and herself was thoroughly explained by what she had always regarded as their simple friendship and the cruel obstruction thrust upon it by her husband's injurious act. Dorothea stood silent, with her eyes cast down dreamily, while images crowded upon her which left the sickening certainty that Will was referring to Mrs. Lydgate. But why sickening? He wanted her to know that here too his conduct should be above suspicion.

Will was not surprised at her silence. His mind also was tumultuously busy while he watched her, and he was feeling rather wildly that something must happen to hinder their parting—some miracle, clearly nothing in their own deliberate speech. Yet, after all, had she any love for him? He could not pretend to himself that he would rather believe her to be without that pain. He could not deny that a secret longing for the assurance that she loved him was at the root of all his words.

Neither of them knew how long they stood in that way. Dorothea was raising her eyes and was about to speak when the door opened and her footman came to say, "The horses are ready, Madam, whenever you like to start."

"Presently," said Dorothea. Then turning to Will, she said, "I have some memoranda to write for the housekeeper."

"I must go," said Will when the door had closed again, advancing towards her. "The day after tomorrow I shall leave Middlemarch."

"You have acted in every way rightly," said Dorothea in a low tone, feeling a pressure at her heart which made it difficult to speak.

She put out her hand, and Will took it for an instant without speaking, for her words had seemed to him cruelly cold and unlike herself. Their eyes met, but there was discontent in his, and in hers there was only sadness. He turned away and took his portfolio under his arm.

"I have never done you injustice. Please remember me," said Dorothea, repressing a rising sob.

"Why should you say that?" said Will with irritation. "As if I were not in danger of forgetting everything else."

He had really a movement of anger against her at that moment, and it impelled him to go away without pause. It was all one flash to Dorothea—his words, his distant bow to her as he reached the door, the sense that he was no longer there. She sank into the chair and for a few moments sat like a statue while images and emotions were hurrying upon her. Joy came first, in spite of the threatening train behind it—joy in the impression that it was really herself whom Will loved and was renouncing, that there was really no other love less permissible, more blameworthy, which honour was hurrying away from. They were parted all the same, but—Dorothea drew a deep breath and felt her strength return—she could think of him unrestrainedly. At that moment the parting was easy to bear; the first sense of loving and being loved excluded sorrow. It was as if some hard, icy pressure had melted and her consciousness had room to expand; her past was come back to her with larger interpretation. The joy was not the less—perhaps it was the more complete just then—because of the irrevocable parting; for there was no reproach, no contemptuous wonder to imagine in any eye or from any lips. He had acted so as to defy reproach and make wonder respectful.

Anyone watching her might have seen that there was a fortifying thought within her. Just as when inventive power is working with glad ease some small claim on the attention is fully met as if it were only a cranny opened to the sunlight, it was easy now for Dorothea to write her memoranda. She spoke her last words to the housekeeper in cheerful tones, and when she seated herself in the carriage her eyes were bright and her cheeks blooming under the dismal bonnet. She threw back the heavy "weepers" and looked before her, wondering which road Will had taken. It was in her nature to be proud that he was blameless, and through all her feelings there ran this vein—"I was right to defend him."

The coachman was used to drive his greys at a good pace, Mr. Casaubon being unenjoying and impatient in everything away from his desk and wanting to get to the end of all journeys; and Dorothea was now bowled along quickly. Driving was pleasant, for rain in the night had laid the dust, and the blue sky looked far off, away from the region of the great clouds that sailed in masses. The earth looked like a happy place under the vast heavens, and Dorothea was wishing that she might overtake Will and see him once more.

After a turn of the road, there he was with the portfolio under his arm; but the next moment she was passing him while he raised his hat, and she felt a pang at being seated there in a sort of exaltation, leaving him behind. She could not look back at him. It was as if a crowd of indifferent objects had thrust them asunder and forced them along different paths, taking them farther and farther away from each other and making it useless to look back. She could no more make any sign that would seem to say, "Need we part?" than she could stop the carriage to wait for him. Nay, what a world of reasons crowded upon her against any movement of her thought towards a future that might reverse the decision of this day!

"I only wish I had known before—I wish he knew—then we could be quite happy in thinking of each other, though we are forever parted. And if I could but have given him the money and made things easier for him!"—were the longings that came back the most persistently. And yet, so heavily did the world weigh on her in spite of her independent energy that with this idea of Will as in need of such help and at a disadvantage with the world, there came always the vision of that unfittingness of any closer relation between them which lay in the opinion of everyone connected with her. She felt to the full all the imperativeness of the motives which urged Will's conduct. How could he dream of her defying the barrier that her husband had placed between them? How could she ever say to herself that she would defy it?

Will's certainty, as the carriage grew smaller in the distance, had much more bitterness in it. Very slight matters were enough to gall him in his sensitive mood, and the sight of Dorothea driving past him while he felt himself plodding along as a poor devil seeking a position in a world which in his present temper offered him little that he coveted made his conduct seem a mere matter of necessity and took away the sustainment of resolve. After all, he had no assurance that she loved him; could any man pretend that he was simply glad in such a case to have the suffering all on his own side?

That evening Will spent with the Lydgates; the next evening he was gone.

BOOK VII

TWO TEMPTATIONS

CHAPTER 63

These little things are great to little man.

—GOLDSMITH

Have you seen much of your scientific phoenix, Lydgate, lately?" said Mr. Toller at one of his Christmas dinner-parties, speaking to Mr. Farebrother on his right hand.

"Not much, I am sorry to say," answered the vicar, accustomed to parry Mr. Toller's banter about his belief in the new medical light. "I am out of the way, and he is too busy."

"Is he? I am glad to hear it," said Dr. Minchin with mingled suavity and surprise.

"He gives a great deal of time to the new hospital," said Mr. Farebrother, who had his reasons for continuing the subject: "I hear of that from my neighbour, Mrs. Casaubon, who goes there often. She says Lydgate is indefatigable and is making a fine thing of Bulstrode's institution. He is preparing a new ward in case of the cholera coming to us."

"And preparing theories of treatment to try on the patients, I suppose," said Mr. Toller.

"Come, Toller, be candid," said Mr. Farebrother. "You are too clever not to see the good of a bold, fresh mind in medicine, as well as in everything else; and as to cholera, I fancy, none of you are very sure what you ought to do. If a man goes a little too far along a new road, it is usually himself that he harms more than anyone else."

"I am sure you and Wrench ought to he obliged to him," said Dr. Minchin, looking towards Toller, "for he has sent you the cream of Peacock's patients."

"Lydgate has been living at a great rate for a young beginner," said Mr. Harry Toller, the brewer. "I suppose his relations in the North back him up."

"I hope so," said Mr. Chichely, "else he ought not to have married that nice girl we were all so fond of. Hang it, one has a grudge against a man who carries off the prettiest girl in the town."

"Ay, by God! And the best too," said Mr. Standish.

"My friend Vincy didn't half like the marriage, I know that," said Mr. Chichely. "*He* wouldn't do much. How the relations on the other side may have come down I can't say." There was an emphatic kind of reticence in Mr. Chichely's manner of speaking.

"Oh, I shouldn't think Lydgate ever looked to practice for a living," said Mr. Toller, with a slight touch of sarcasm; and there the subject was dropped.

This was not the first time that Mr. Farebrother had heard hints of Lydgate's expenses being obviously too great to be met by his practice, but he thought it not unlikely that there were resources or expectations which excused the large outlay at the time of Lydgate's marriage and which might hinder any bad consequences from the disappointment in his practice. One evening, when he took the pains to go to Middlemarch on purpose to have a chat with Lydgate as of old, he noticed in him an air of excited effort quite unlike his usual easy way of keeping silence or breaking it with abrupt energy whenever he had anything to say. Lydgate talked persistently when they were in his work-room, putting arguments for and against the probability of certain biological views; but he had none of those definite things to say or to show which give the way-marks of a patient, uninterrupted pursuit, such as he used himself to insist on, saying that "there must be a systole and diastole in all inquiry," and that "a man's mind must be continually expanding and shrinking between the whole human horizon and the horizon of an object-glass." That evening he seemed to be talking widely for the sake of resisting any personal bearing; and before long they went into the drawing-room, where Lydgate, having asked Rosamond to give them music, sank back in his chair in silence, but with a strange light in his eyes. "He may have been taking an opiate," was a thought that crossed Mr. Farebrother's mind—"tic-douloureux, perhaps, or medical worries."

It did not occur to him that Lydgate's marriage was not delightful; he believed, as the rest did, that Rosamond was an amiable, docile creature, though he had always thought her rather uninteresting—a little too much the pattern-card of the finishing-school; and his mother could not forgive Rosamond because she never seemed to see that Henrietta Noble was in the room. "However, Lydgate fell in love with her," said the vicar to himself, "and she must be to his taste."

Mr. Farebrother was aware that Lydgate was a proud man, but having very little corresponding fibre in himself and perhaps too little care about personal dignity, except the dignity of not being mean or foolish, he could hardly allow enough for the way in which Lydgate shrank, as from a burn, from the utterance of any word about his private affairs. And soon after that conversation at Mr. Toller's, the vicar learned something which made him watch the more eagerly for an opportunity of indirectly letting Lydgate know that if he wanted to open himself about any difficulty there was a friendly ear ready.

The opportunity came at Mr. Vincy's, where, on New Year's Day, there was a party to which Mr. Farebrother was irresistibly invited, on the plea that he must not forsake his old friends on the first new year of his being a greater man, and rector as well as vicar. And this party was thoroughly friendly: all the ladies of the Farebrother family were present; the Vincy children all dined at the table; and Fred had persuaded his mother that if she did not invite Mary Garth, the Farebrothers would regard it as a slight to themselves, Mary being their particular friend. Mary came, and Fred was in high spirits, though his enjoyment was of a checkered kind—triumph that his mother should see Mary's importance with the

chief personages in the party, being much streaked with jealousy when Mr. Farebrother sat down by her. Fred used to be much more easy about his own accomplishments in the days when he had not begun to dread being "bowled out by Farebrother," and this terror was still before him. Mrs. Vincy, in her fullest matronly bloom, looked at Mary's little figure, rough wavy hair, and visage quite without lilies and roses, and wondered, trying unsuccessfully to fancy herself caring about Mary's appearance in wedding clothes or feeling complacency in grandchildren who would "feature" the Garths. However, the party was a merry one, and Mary was particularly bright, being glad, for Fred's sake, that his friends were getting kinder to her, and being also quite willing that they should see how much she was valued by others whom they must admit to be judges.

Mr. Farebrother noticed that Lydgate seemed bored and that Mr. Vincy spoke as little as possible to his son-in-law. Rosamond was perfectly graceful and calm, and only a subtle observation such as the vicar had not been roused to bestow on her would have perceived the total absence of that interest in her husband's presence which a loving wife is sure to betray, even if etiquette keeps her aloof from him. When Lydgate was taking part in the conversation, she never looked towards him any more than if she had been a sculptured Psyche modelled to look another way; and when, after being called out for an hour or two, he re-entered the room, she seemed unconscious of the fact, which eighteen months before would have had the effect of a numeral before cyphers. In reality, however, she was intensely aware of Lydgate's voice and movements; and her pretty, good-tempered air of unconsciousness was a studied negation by which she satisfied her inward opposition to him without compromise of propriety. When the ladies were in the drawing-room after Lydgate had been called away from the dessert, Mrs. Farebrother, when Rosamond happened to be near her, said, "You have to give up a great deal of your husband's society, Mrs. Lydgate."

"Yes, the life of a medical man is very arduous, especially when he is so devoted to his profession as Mr. Lydgate is," said Rosamond, who was standing, and moved easily away at the end of this correct little speech.

"It is dreadfully dull for her when there is no company," said Mrs. Vincy, who was seated at the old lady's side. "I am sure I thought so when Rosamond was ill, and I was staying with her. You know, Mrs. Farebrother, ours is a cheerful house. I am of a cheerful disposition myself, and Mr. Vincy always likes something to be going on. That is what Rosamond has been used to. Very different from a husband out at odd hours, and never knowing when he will come home, and of a close, proud disposition, *I* think." Indiscreet Mrs. Vincy did lower her tone slightly with this parenthesis. "But Rosamond always had an angel of a temper; her brothers used very often not to please her, but she was never the girl to show temper; from a baby she was always as good as good, and with a complexion beyond anything. But my children are all good-tempered, thank God."

This was easily credible to anyone looking at Mrs. Vincy as she threw back her broad cap-strings and smiled towards her three little girls, aged from seven to eleven. But in that smiling glance she was obliged to include Mary Garth, whom the three girls had got into a corner to make her tell them stories. Mary was just finishing the delicious tale of Rumpelstiltskin, which she had well by heart because Letty was never tired of communicating it to her ignorant elders from a favourite red volume. Louisa, Mrs. Vincy's darling, now ran to her with wide-eyed, serious excitement, crying, "Oh Mamma, Mamma, the little man stamped so hard on the floor he couldn't get his leg out again!"

"Bless you, my cherub!" said Mamma; "you shall tell me all about it tomorrow. Go and listen!" And then, as her eyes followed Louisa back towards the attractive corner, she thought that if Fred wished her to invite Mary again she would make no objection, the children being so pleased with her.

But presently the corner became still more animated, for Mr. Farebrother came in, and seating himself behind Louisa, took her on his lap, whereupon the girls all insisted that he must hear Rumpelstiltskin, and Mary must tell it over again. He insisted too, and Mary, without fuss, began again in her neat fashion, with precisely the same words as before. Fred, who had also seated himself near, would have felt unmixed triumph in Mary's effectiveness if Mr. Farebrother had not been looking at her with evident admiration, while he dramatized an intense interest in the tale to please the children.

"You will never care any more about my one-eyed giant, Loo," said Fred at the end.

"Yes, I shall. Tell about him now," said Louisa.

"Oh I dare say, I am quite cut out. Ask Mr. Farebrother."

"Yes," added Mary; "ask Mr. Farebrother to tell you about the ants whose beautiful house was knocked down by a giant named Tom, and he thought they didn't mind because he couldn't hear them cry or see them use their pocket-handkerchiefs."

"Please," said Louisa, looking up at the vicar.

"No, no, I am a grave old parson. If I try to draw a story out of my bag a sermon comes instead. Shall I preach you a sermon?" said he, putting on his short-sighted glasses and pursing up his lips.

"Yes," said Louisa falteringly.

"Let me see, then. Against cakes; how cakes are bad things, especially if they are sweet and have plums in them."

Louisa took the affair rather seriously and got down from the vicar's knee to go to Fred.

"Ah, I see it will not do to preach on New Year's Day," said Mr. Farebrother, rising and walking away. He had discovered of late that Fred had become jealous of him and also that he himself was not losing his preference for Mary above all other women.

"A delightful young person is Miss Garth," said Mrs. Farebrother, who had been watching her son's movements.

"Yes," said Mrs. Vincy, obliged to reply as the old lady turned to her expectantly. "It is a pity she is not better looking."

"I cannot say that," said Mrs. Farebrother decisively. "I like her countenance. We must not always ask for beauty when a good God has seen fit to make an excellent young woman without it. I put good manners first, and Miss Garth will know how to conduct herself in any station."

The old lady was a little sharp in her tone, having a prospective reference to Mary's becoming her daughter-in-law; for there was this inconvenience in Mary's position with regard to Fred that it was not suitable to be made public, and hence the three ladies at Lowick parsonage were still hoping that Camden would choose Miss Garth.

New visitors entered, and the drawing-room was given up to music and games, while whist-tables were prepared in the

quiet room on the other side of the hall. Mr. Farebrother played a rubber to satisfy his mother, who regarded her occasional whist as a protest against scandal and novelty of opinion, in which light even a revoke had its dignity. But at the end he got Mr. Chichely to take his place and left the room. As he crossed the hall, Lydgate had just come in and was taking off his greatcoat.

"You are the man I was going to look for," said the vicar; and instead of entering the drawing-room, they walked along the hall and stood against the fireplace, where the frosty air helped to make a glowing bank. "You see, I can leave the whist-table easily enough," he went on, smiling at Lydgate, "now I don't play for money. I owe that to you, Mrs. Casaubon says."

"How?" said Lydgate coldly.

"Ah, you didn't mean me to know it; I call that ungenerous reticence. You should let a man have the pleasure of feeling that you have done him a good turn. I don't enter into some people's dislike of being under an obligation; upon my word, I prefer being under an obligation to everybody for behaving well to me."

"I can't tell what you mean," said Lydgate, "unless it is that I once spoke of you to Mrs. Casaubon. But I did not think that she would break her promise not to mention that I had done so," said Lydgate, leaning his back against the corner of the mantelpiece and showing no radiance in his face.

"It was Brooke who let it out, only the other day. He paid me the compliment of saying that he was very glad I had the living, though you had come across his tactics and had praised me up as a Ken and a Tillotson and that sort of thing, till Mrs. Casaubon would hear of no one else."

"Oh, Brooke is such a leaky-minded fool," said Lydgate contemptuously.

"Well, I was glad of the leakiness then. I don't see why you shouldn't like me to know that you wished to do me a service, my dear fellow. And you certainly have done me one. It's rather a strong check to one's self-complacency to find how much of one's right doing depends on not being in want of money. A man will not be tempted to say the Lord's Prayer backwards to please the Devil if he doesn't want the Devil's services. I have no need to hang on the smiles of chance now."

"I don't see that there's any money-getting without chance," said Lydgate; "if a man gets it in a profession, it's pretty sure to come by chance."

Mr. Farebrother thought he could account for this speech, in striking contrast with Lydgate's former way of talking, as the perversity which will often spring from the moodiness of a man ill at ease in his affairs. He answered in a tone of good-humored admission, "Ah, there's enormous patience wanted with the way of the world. But it is the easier for a man to wait patiently when he has friends who love him, and ask for nothing better than to help him through, so far as it lies in their power."

"Oh yes," said Lydgate in a careless tone, changing his attitude and looking at his watch. "People make much more of their difficulties than they need to do."

He knew as distinctly as possible that this was an offer of help to himself from Mr. Farebrother, and he could not bear it. So strangely determined are we mortals that after having been long gratified with the sense that he had privately done the vicar a service, the suggestion that the vicar discerned his need of a service in return made him shrink into unconquerable reticence. Besides, behind all making of such offers, what else must come? That he should "mention his case," imply that he wanted specific things. At that moment, suicide seemed easier.

Mr. Farebrother was too keen a man not to know the meaning of that reply, and there was a certain massiveness in Lydgate's manner and tone, corresponding with his physique, which if he repelled your advances in the first instance seemed to put persuasive devices out of question.

"What time are you?" said the vicar, devouring his wounded feeling.

"After eleven," said Lydgate. And they went into the drawing-room.

CHAPTER 64

1ST GENT. Where lies the power, there let the blame lie too.
2ND GENT. Nay, power is relative; you cannot fright
The coming pest with border fortresses,
Or catch your carp with subtle argument.
All force is twain in one: cause is not cause Unless effect be there; and action's self
Must needs contain a passive. So command Exists but with obedience.

Even if Lydgate had been inclined to be quite open about his affairs, he knew that it would have hardly been in Mr. Farebrother's power to give him the help he immediately wanted. With the year's bills coming in from his tradesmen, with Dover's threatening hold on his furniture, and with nothing to depend on but slow, dribbling payments from patients who must not be offended—for the handsome fees he had had from Freshitt Hall and Lowick Manor had been easily absorbed—nothing less than a thousand pounds would have freed him from actual embarrassment and left a residue which, according to the favourite phrase of hopefulness in such circumstances, would have given him "time to look about him."

Naturally, the merry Christmas bringing the happy New Year, when fellow-citizens expect to be paid for the trouble and goods they have smilingly bestowed on their neighbours, had so tightened the pressure of sordid cares on Lydgate's mind that it was hardly possible for him to think unbrokenly of any other subject, even the most habitual and soliciting. He was not an ill-tempered man; his intellectual activity, the ardent kindness of his heart, as well as his strong frame, would always, under tolerably easy conditions, have kept him above the petty, uncontrolled susceptibilities which make bad temper. But he was now a prey to that worst irritation which arises not simply from annoyances, but from the second consciousness underlying those annoyances, of wasted energy and a degrading preoccupation, which was the reverse of all his former purposes. "*This* is what I am thinking of, and *that* is what I might have been thinking of," was the bitter incessant murmur within him, making every difficulty a double goad to impatience.

Some gentlemen have made an amazing figure in literature by general discontent with the universe as a trap of dulness into which their great souls have fallen by mistake; but the sense of a stupendous self and an insignificant world may have its consolations. Lydgate's discontent was much harder to bear: it was the sense that there was a grand existence in thought and effective action lying around him, while his self was being narrowed into the miserable isolation of egoistic fears, and vulgar anxieties for events that might allay such fears. His troubles will perhaps appear miserably sordid and beneath the attention of lofty persons who can know nothing of debt except on a magnificent scale. Doubtless they were sordid; and for the majority, who are not lofty, there is no escape from sordidness but by being free from money-craving, with all its base hopes and temptations, its watching for death, its hinted requests, its horse-dealer's desire to make bad work pass for good, its seeking for function which ought to be another's, its compulsion often to long for luck in the shape of a wide calamity.

It was because Lydgate writhed under the idea of getting his neck beneath this vile yoke that he had fallen into a bitter, moody state which was continually widening Rosamond's alienation from him. After the first disclosure about the bill of sale, he had made many efforts to draw her into sympathy with him about possible measures for narrowing their expenses, and with the threatening approach of Christmas his propositions grew more and more definite. "We two can do with only one servant and live on very little," he said, "and I shall manage with one horse." For Lydgate, as we have seen, had begun to reason, with a more distinct vision, about the expenses of living, and any share of pride he had given to appearances of that sort was meagre compared with the pride which made him revolt from exposure as a debtor or from asking men to help him with their money.

"Of course you can dismiss the other two servants if you like," said Rosamond; "but I should have thought it would be very injurious to your position for us to live in a poor way. You must expect your practice to be lowered."

"My dear Rosamond, it is not a question of choice. We have begun too expensively. Peacock, you know, lived in a much smaller house than this. It is my fault: I ought to have known better, and I deserve a thrashing—if there were anybody who had a right to give it me—for bringing you into the necessity of living in a poorer way than you have been used to. But we married because we loved each other, I suppose. And that may help us to pull along till things get better. Come, dear, put down that work and come to me."

He was really in chill gloom about her at that moment, but he dreaded a future without affection and was determined to resist the oncoming of division between them. Rosamond obeyed him, and he took her on his knee, but in her secret soul she was utterly aloof from him. The poor thing saw only that the world was not ordered to her liking, and Lydgate was part of that world. But he held her waist with one hand and laid the other gently on both of hers, for this rather abrupt man had much tenderness in his manners towards women, seeming to have always present in his imagination the weakness of their frames and the delicate poise of their health both in body and mind. And he began again to speak persuasively.

"I find, now I look into things a little, Rosy, that it is wonderful what an amount of money slips away in our housekeeping. I suppose the servants are careless, and we have had a great many people coming. But there must be many in our rank who manage with much less: they must do with commoner things, I suppose, and look after the scraps. It seems, money goes but a little way in these matters, for Wrench has everything as plain as possible, and he has a very large practice."

“Oh, if you think of living as the Wrenches do!” said Rosamond with a little turn of her neck. “But I have heard you express your disgust at that way of living.”

“Yes, they have bad taste in everything—they make economy look ugly. We needn’t do that. I only meant that they avoid expenses, although Wrench has a capital practice.”

“Why should not you have a good practice, Tertius? Mr. Peacock had. You should be more careful not to offend people, and you should send out medicines as the others do. I am sure you began well, and you got several good houses. It cannot answer to be eccentric; you should think what will be generally liked,” said Rosamond in a decided little tone of admonition.

Lydgate’s anger rose; he was prepared to be indulgent towards feminine weakness, but not towards feminine dictation. The shallowness of a waternixie’s soul may have a charm until she becomes didactic. But he controlled himself and only said with a touch of despotic firmness, “What I am to do in my practice, Rosy, it is for me to judge. That is not the question between us. It is enough for you to know that our income is likely to be a very narrow one—hardly four hundred, perhaps less, for a long time to come, and we must try to rearrange our lives in accordance with that fact.”

Rosamond was silent for a moment or two, looking before her, and then said, “My uncle Bulstrode ought to allow you a salary for the time you give to the hospital; it is not right that you should work for nothing.”

“It was understood from the beginning that my services would be gratuitous. That, again, need not enter into our discussion. I have pointed out what is the only probability,” said Lydgate impatiently. Then checking himself, he went on more quietly, “I think I see one resource which would free us from a good deal of the present difficulty. I hear that young Ned Plymdale is going to be married to Miss Sophy Toller. They are rich, and it is not often that a good house is vacant in Middlemarch. I feel sure that they would be glad to take this house from us with most of our furniture, and they would be willing to pay handsomely for the lease. I can employ Trumbull to speak to Plymdale about it.”

Rosamond left her husband’s knee and walked slowly to the other end of the room; when she turned round and walked towards him, it was evident that the tears had come and that she was biting her under-lip and clasping her hands to keep herself from crying. Lydgate was wretched—shaken with anger and yet feeling that it would be unmanly to vent the anger just now.

“I am very sorry, Rosamond; I know this is painful.”

“I thought, at least, when I had borne to send the plate back and have that man taking an inventory of the furniture—I should have thought *that* would suffice.”

“I explained it to you at the time, dear. That was only a security, and behind that security there is a debt. And that debt must be paid within the next few months, else we shall have our furniture sold. If young Plymdale will take our house and most of our furniture, we shall be able to pay that debt, and some others too, and we shall be quit of a place too expensive for us. We might take a smaller house; Trumbull, I know, has a very decent one to let at thirty pounds a year, and this is ninety.” Lydgate uttered this speech in the curt, hammering way with which we usually try to nail down a vague mind to imperative facts. Tears rolled silently down Rosamond’s cheeks; she just pressed her handkerchief against them and stood looking at the large vase on the mantelpiece. It was a moment of more intense bitterness than she had ever felt before. At last she said without hurry and with careful emphasis, “I never could have believed that you would like to act in that way.”

“Like it?” burst out Lydgate, rising from his chair, thrusting his hands in his pockets, and stalking away from the hearth; “it’s not a question of liking. Of course, I don’t like it; it’s the only thing I can do.” He wheeled round there and turned towards her.

“I should have thought there were many other means than that,” said Rosamond. “Let us have a sale and leave Middlemarch altogether.”

“To do what? What is the use of my leaving my work in Middlemarch to go where I have none? We should be just as penniless elsewhere as we are here,” said Lydgate still more angrily.

“If we are to be in that position it will be entirely your own doing, Tertius,” said Rosamond, turning round to speak with the fullest conviction. “You will not behave as you ought to do to your own family. You offended Captain Lydgate. Sir Godwin was very kind to me when we were at Quallingham, and I am sure if you showed proper regard to him and told him your affairs, he would do anything for you. But rather than that, you like giving up our house and furniture to Mr. Ned Plymdale.”

There was something like fierceness in Lydgate’s eyes as he answered with new violence, “Well then, if you will have it so, I do like it. I admit that I like it better than making a fool of myself by going to beg where it’s of no use. Understand then, that it is what *I like to do*.”

There was a tone in the last sentence which was equivalent to the clutch of his strong hand on Rosamond’s delicate arm. But for all that, his will was not a whit stronger than hers. She immediately walked out of the room in silence but with an intense determination to hinder what Lydgate liked to do.

He went out of the house, but as his blood cooled he felt that the chief result of the discussion was a deposit of dread within him at the idea of opening with his wife in future subjects which might again urge him to violent speech. It was as if a fracture in delicate crystal had begun, and he was afraid of any movement that might make it fatal. His marriage would be a mere piece of bitter irony if they could not go on loving each other. He had long ago made up his mind to what he thought was her negative character—her want of sensibility, which showed itself in disregard both of his specific wishes and of his general aims. The first great disappointment had been borne; the tender devotedness and docile adoration of the ideal wife must be renounced, and life must be taken up on a lower stage of expectation, as it is by men who have lost their limbs. But the real wife had not only her claims, she had still a hold on his heart, and it was his intense desire that the hold should remain strong. In marriage, the certainty, “She will never love me much,” is easier to bear than the fear, “I shall love her no more.” Hence, after that outburst, his inward effort was entirely to excuse her and to blame the hard circumstances which were partly his fault. He tried that evening, by petting her, to heal the wound he had made in the morning, and it was not in Rosamond’s nature to be repellent or sulky; indeed, she welcomed the signs that her husband loved her and was under control. But this was something quite distinct from loving *him*.

Lydgate would not have chosen soon to recur to the plan of parting with the house; he was resolved to carry it out and say as little more about it as possible. But Rosamond herself touched on it at breakfast by saying mildly, “Have you spoken to Trumbull yet?”

“No,” said Lydgate, “but I shall call on him as I go by this morning. No time must be lost.” He took Rosamond’s question as a sign that she withdrew her inward opposition and kissed her head caressingly when he got up to go away.

As soon as it was late enough to make a call, Rosamond went to Mrs. Plymdale, Mr. Ned’s mother, and entered with pretty congratulations into the subject of the coming marriage. Mrs. Plymdale’s maternal view was that Rosamond might possibly now have retrospective glimpses of her own folly, and feeling the advantages to be at present all on the side of her son, was too kind a woman not to behave graciously.

“Yes, Ned is most happy, I must say. And Sophy Toller is all I could desire in a daughter-in-law. Of course her father is able to do something handsome for her—that is only what would be expected with a brewery like his. And the connexion is everything we should desire. But that is not what I look at. She is such a very nice girl—no airs, no pretensions, though on a level with the first. I don’t mean with the titled aristocracy. I see very little good in people aiming out of their own sphere. I mean that Sophy is equal to the best in the town, and she is contented with that.”

“I have always thought her very agreeable,” said Rosamond.

“I look upon it as a reward for Ned, who never held his head too high, that he should have got into the very best connexion,” continued Mrs. Plymdale, her native sharpness softened by a fervid sense that she was taking a correct view. “And such particular people as the Tollers are, they might have objected because some of our friends are not theirs. It is well known that your aunt Bulstrode and I have been intimate from our youth, and Mr. Plymdale has been always on Mr. Bulstrode’s side. And I myself prefer serious opinions. But the Tollers have welcomed Ned all the same.”

“I am sure he is a very deserving, well-principled young man,” said Rosamond with a neat air of patronage, in return for Mrs. Plymdale’s wholesome corrections.

“Oh, he has not the style of a captain in the army, or that sort of carriage as if everybody was beneath him, or that showy kind of talking and singing and intellectual talent. But I am thankful he has not. It is a poor preparation both for here and Hereafter.”

“Oh dear, yes; appearances have very little to do with happiness,” said Rosamond. “I think there is every prospect of their being a happy couple. What house will they take?”

“Oh, as for that, they must put up with what they can get. They have been looking at the house in St. Peter’s Place, next to Mr. Hackbutt’s; it belongs to him, and he is putting it nicely in repair. I suppose they are not likely to hear of a better. Indeed, I think Ned will decide the matter today.”

“I should think it is a nice house; I like St. Peter’s Place.”

“Well, it is near the church, and a genteel situation. But the windows are narrow, and it is all ups and downs. You don’t happen to know of any other that would be at liberty?” said Mrs. Plymdale, fixing her round black eyes on Rosamond with the animation of a sudden thought in them.

“Oh no; I hear so little of those things.”

Rosamond had not foreseen that question and answer in setting out to pay her visit; she had simply meant to gather any information which would help her to avert the parting with her own house under circumstances thoroughly disagreeable to her. As to the untruth in her reply, she no more reflected on it than she did on the untruth there was in her saying that appearances had very little to do with happiness. Her object, she was convinced, was thoroughly justifiable; it was Lydgate whose intention was inexcusable, and there was a plan in her mind which, when she had carried it out fully, would prove how very false a step it would have been for him to have descended from his position.

She returned home by Mr. Borthrop Trumbull’s office, meaning to call there. It was the first time in her life that Rosamond had thought of doing anything in the form of business, but she felt equal to the occasion. That she should be obliged to do what she intensely disliked was an idea which turned her quiet tenacity into active invention. Here was a case in which it could not be enough simply to disobey and be serenely, placidly obstinate; she must act according to her judgement, and she said to herself that her judgement was right—indeed, if it had not been, she would not have wished to act on it.

Mr. Trumbull was in the back-room of his office and received Rosamond with his finest manners, not only because he had much sensibility to her charms, but because the good-natured fibre in him was stirred by his certainty that Lydgate was in difficulties and that this uncommonly pretty woman—this young lady with the highest personal attractions—was likely to feel the pinch of trouble, to find herself involved in circumstances beyond her control. He begged her to do him the honour to take a seat and stood before her trimming and comporting himself with an eager solicitude, which was chiefly benevolent. Rosamond’s first question was whether her husband had called on Mr. Trumbull that morning to speak about disposing of their house.

“Yes, ma’am; yes, he did; he did so,” said the good auctioneer, trying to throw something soothing into his iteration. “I was about to fulfil his order, if possible, this afternoon. He wished me not to procrastinate.”

“I called to tell you not to go any further, Mr. Trumbull; and I beg of you not to mention what has been said on the subject. Will you oblige me?”

“Certainly I will, Mrs. Lydgate, certainly. Confidence is sacred with me on business or any other topic. I am then to consider the commission withdrawn?” said Mr. Trumbull, adjusting the long ends of his blue cravat with both hands and looking at Rosamond deferentially.

“Yes, if you please. I find that Mr. Ned Plymdale has taken a house—the one in St. Peter’s Place next to Mr. Hackbutt’s. Mr. Lydgate would be annoyed that his orders should be fulfilled uselessly. And besides that, there are other circumstances which render the proposal unnecessary.”

“Very good, Mrs. Lydgate, very good. I am at your commands whenever you require any service of me,” said Mr. Trumbull, who felt pleasure in conjecturing that some new resources had been opened. “Rely on me, I beg. The affair shall go no further.”

That evening Lydgate was a little comforted by observing that Rosamond was more lively than she had usually been of late and even seemed interested in doing what would please him without being asked. He thought, "If she will be happy and I can rub through, what does it all signify? It is only a narrow swamp that we have to pass in a long journey. If I can get my mind clear again, I shall do."

He was so much cheered that he began to search for an account of experiments which he had long ago meant to look up and had neglected out of that creeping self-despair which comes in the train of petty anxieties. He felt again some of the old delightful absorption in a far-reaching inquiry, while Rosamond played the quiet music which was as helpful to his meditation as the plash of an oar on the evening lake. It was rather late; he had pushed away all the books and was looking at the fire with his hands clasped behind his head in forgetfulness of everything except the construction of a new controlling experiment, when Rosamond, who had left the piano and was leaning back in her chair watching him, said, "Mr. Ned Plymdale has taken a house already."

Lydgate, startled and jarred, looked up in silence for a moment like a man who has been disturbed in his sleep. Then flushing with an unpleasant consciousness, he asked, "How do you know?"

"I called at Mrs. Plymdale's this morning, and she told me that he had taken the house in St. Peter's Place next to Mr. Hackbutt's."

Lydgate was silent. He drew his hands from behind his head and pressed them against the hair which was hanging, as it was apt to do, in a mass on his forehead, while he rested his elbows on his knees. He was feeling bitter disappointment, as if he had opened a door out of a suffocating place and had found it walled up; but he also felt sure that Rosamond was pleased with the cause of his disappointment. He preferred not looking at her and not speaking until he had got over the first spasm of vexation. After all, he said in his bitterness, what can a woman care about so much as house and furniture? A husband without them is an absurdity. When he looked up and pushed his hair aside, his dark eyes had a miserable, blank non-expectance of sympathy in them, but he only said coolly, "Perhaps someone else may turn up. I told Trumbull to be on the look-out if he failed with Plymdale."

Rosamond made no remark. She trusted to the chance that nothing more would pass between her husband and the auctioneer until some issue should have justified her interference; at any rate, she had hindered the event which she immediately dreaded. After a pause, she said, "How much money is it that those disagreeable people want?"

"What disagreeable people?"

"Those who took the list—and the others. I mean, how much money would satisfy them so that you need not be troubled any more?"

Lydgate surveyed her for a moment as if he were looking for symptoms and then said, "Oh, if I could have got six hundred from Plymdale for furniture and as premium, I might have managed. I could have paid off Dover and given enough on account to the others to make them wait patiently if we contracted our expenses."

"But I mean how much should you want if we stayed in this house?"

"More than I am likely to get anywhere," said Lydgate with rather a grating sarcasm in his tone. It angered him to perceive that Rosamond's mind was wandering over impracticable wishes instead of facing possible efforts.

"Why should you not mention the sum?" said Rosamond with a mild indication that she did not like his manners.

"Well," said Lydgate in a guessing tone, "it would take at least a thousand to set me at ease. But," he added incisively, "I have to consider what I shall do without it, not with it."

Rosamond said no more.

But the next day she carried out her plan of writing to Sir Godwin Lydgate. Since the captain's visit, she had received a letter from him, and also one from Mrs. Mengan, his married sister, condoling with her on the loss of her baby and expressing vaguely the hope that they should see her again at Quallingham. Lydgate had told her that this politeness meant nothing, but she was secretly convinced that any backwardness in Lydgate's family towards him was due to his cold and contemptuous behaviour, and she had answered the letters in her most charming manner, feeling some confidence that a specific invitation would follow. But there had been total silence. The captain evidently was not a great penman, and Rosamond reflected that the sisters might have been abroad. However, the season was come for thinking of friends at home, and at any rate Sir Godwin, who had chucked her under the chin and pronounced her to be like the celebrated beauty Mrs. Croly, who had made a conquest of him in 1790, would be touched by any appeal from her and would find it pleasant for her sake to behave as he ought to do towards his nephew. Rosamond was naïvely convinced of what an old gentleman ought to do to prevent her from suffering annoyance. And she wrote what she considered the most judicious letter possible, one which would strike Sir Godwin as a proof of her excellent sense, pointing out how desirable it was that Tertius should quit such a place as Middlemarch for one more fitted to his talents, how the unpleasant character of the inhabitants had hindered his professional success, and how in consequence he was in money difficulties, from which it would require a thousand pounds thoroughly to extricate him. She did not say that Tertius was unaware of her intention to write, for she had the idea that his supposed sanction of her letter would be in accordance with what she did say of his great regard for his uncle Godwin as the relative who had always been his best friend. Such was the force of poor Rosamond's tactics now she applied them to affairs.

This had happened before the party on New Year's Day, and no answer had yet come from Sir Godwin. But on the morning of that day Lydgate had to learn that Rosamond had revoked his order to Borthrop Trumbull. Feeling it necessary that she should be gradually accustomed to the idea of their quitting the house in Lowick Gate, he overcame his reluctance to speak to her again on the subject, and when they were breakfasting said, "I shall try to see Trumbull this morning and tell him to advertise the house in the *Pioneer* and the *Trumpet*. If the thing were advertised, someone might be inclined to take it who would not otherwise have thought of a change. In these country places many people go on in their old houses when their families are too large for them for want of knowing where they can find another. And Trumbull seems to have got no bite at all."

Rosamond knew that the inevitable moment was come. "I ordered Trumbull not to inquire further," she said with a careful calmness which was evidently defensive.

Lydgate stared at her in mute amazement. Only half an hour before he had been fastening up her plaits for her and talking the "little language" of affection, which Rosamond, though not returning it, accepted as if she had been a serene and lovely image, now and then miraculously dimpling towards her votary. With such fibres still astir in him, the shock he received could not at once be distinctly anger; it was confused pain. He laid down the knife and fork with which he was carving, and throwing himself back in his chair, said at last with a cool irony in his tone, "May I ask when and why you did so?"

"When I knew that the Plymdales had taken a house, I called to tell him not to mention ours to them, and at the same time I told him not to let the affair go on any further. I knew that it would be very injurious to you if it were known that you wished to part with your house and furniture, and I had a very strong objection to it. I think that was reason enough."

"It was of no consequence then that I had told you imperative reasons of another kind, of no consequence that I had come to a different conclusion and given an order accordingly?" said Lydgate bitingly, the thunder and lightning gathering about his brow and eyes.

The effect of anyone's anger on Rosamond had always been to make her shrink in cold dislike and to become all the more calmly correct in the conviction that she was not the person to misbehave, whatever others might do. She replied, "I think I had a perfect right to speak on a subject which concerns me at least as much as you."

"Clearly—you had a right to speak, but only to me. You had no right to contradict my orders secretly and treat me as if I were a fool," said Lydgate in the same tone as before. Then with some added scorn, "Is it possible to make you understand what the consequences will be? Is it of any use for me to tell you again why we *must* try to part with the house?"

"It is not necessary for you to tell me again," said Rosamond in a voice that fell and trickled like cold water-drops. "I remembered what you said. You spoke just as violently as you do now. But that does not alter my opinion that you ought to try every other means rather than take a step which is so painful to me. And as to advertising the house, I think it would be perfectly degrading to you."

"And suppose I disregard your opinion as you disregard mine?"

"You can do so, of course. But I think you ought to have told me before we were married that you would place me in the worst position, rather than give up your own will."

Lydgate did not speak, but tossed his head on one side and twitched the corners of his mouth in despair. Rosamond, seeing that he was not looking at her, rose and set his cup of coffee before him; but he took no notice of it and went on with an inward drama and argument, occasionally moving in his seat, resting one arm on the table, and rubbing his hand against his hair. There was a conflux of emotions and thoughts in him that would not let him either give thorough way to his anger or persevere with simple rigidity of resolve. Rosamond took advantage of his silence.

"When we were married, everyone felt that your position was very high. I could not have imagined then that you would want to sell our furniture and take a house in Bride Street, where the rooms are like cages. If we are to live in that way let us at least leave Middlemarch."

"These would be very strong considerations," said Lydgate, half ironically—still there was a withered paleness about his lips as he looked at his coffee, and did not drink—"these would be very strong considerations if I did not happen to be in debt."

"Many persons must have been in debt in the same way, but if they are respectable, people trust them. I am sure I have heard Papa say that the Torbits were in debt, and they went on very well. It cannot be good to act rashly," said Rosamond with serene wisdom.

Lydgate sat paralysed by opposing impulses; since no reasoning he could apply to Rosamond seemed likely to conquer her assent, he wanted to smash and grind some object on which he could at least produce an impression, or else to tell her brutally that he was master and she must obey. But he not only dreaded the effect of such extremities on their mutual life; he had a growing dread of Rosamond's quiet, elusive obstinacy, which would not allow any assertion of power to be final; and again, she had touched him in a spot of keenest feeling by implying that she had been deluded with a false vision of happiness in marrying him. As to saying that he was master, it was not the fact. The very resolution to which he had wrought himself by dint of logic and honourable pride was beginning to relax under her torpedo contact. He swallowed half his cup of coffee and then rose to go.

"I may at least request that you will not go to Trumbull at present—until it has been seen that there are no other means," said Rosamond. Although she was not subject to much fear, she felt it safer not to betray that she had written to Sir Godwin. "Promise me that you will not go to him for a few weeks, or without telling me."

Lydgate gave a short laugh. "I think it is I who should exact a promise that you will do nothing without telling me," he said, turning his eyes sharply upon her and then moving to the door.

"You remember that we are going to dine at Papa's," said Rosamond, wishing that he should turn and make a more thorough concession to her. But he only said, "Oh yes," impatiently and went away. She held it to be very odious in him that he did not think the painful propositions he had had to make to her were enough, without showing so unpleasant a temper. And when she put the moderate request that he would defer going to Trumbull again, it was cruel in him not to assure her of what he meant to do. She was convinced of her having acted in every way for the best, and each grating or angry speech of Lydgate's served only as an addition to the register of offences in her mind. Poor Rosamond for months had begun to associate her husband with feelings of disappointment, and the terribly inflexible relation of marriage had lost its charm of encouraging delightful dreams. It had freed her from the disagreeables of her father's house, but it had not given her everything that she had wished and hoped. The Lydgate with whom she had been in love had been a group of airy conditions for her, most of which had disappeared, while their place had been taken by everyday details which must be lived through slowly from hour to hour, not floated through with a rapid selection of favourable aspects. The habits of Lydgate's profession, his home preoccupation with scientific subjects, which seemed to her almost like a morbid vampire's taste, his peculiar views of things which had never entered into the dialogue of courtship—all these continually alienating influences, even without the fact of his having placed himself at a disadvantage in the town and without that first shock of revelation about Dover's debt, would have made his presence dull to her. There was another presence which ever since the

early days of her marriage, until four months ago, had been an agreeable excitement, but that was gone; Rosamond would not confess to herself how much the consequent blank had to do with her utter ennui; and it seemed to her (perhaps she was right) that an invitation to Quallingham and an opening for Lydgate to settle elsewhere than in Middlemarch—in London, or somewhere likely to be free from unpleasantness—would satisfy her quite well and make her indifferent to the absence of Will Ladislaw, towards whom she felt some resentment for his exaltation of Mrs. Casaubon.

That was the state of things with Lydgate and Rosamond on the New Year's Day when they dined at her father's, she looking mildly neutral towards him in remembrance of his ill-tempered behaviour at breakfast, and he carrying a much deeper effect from the inward conflict in which that morning scene was only one of many epochs. His flushed effort while talking to Mr. Farebrother—his effort after the cynical pretence that all ways of getting money are essentially the same and that chance has an empire which reduces choice to a fool's illusion—was but the symptom of a wavering resolve, a benumbed response to the old stimuli of enthusiasm.

What was he to do? He saw even more keenly than Rosamond did the dreariness of taking her into the small house in Bride Street, where she would have scanty furniture around her and discontent within: a life of privation and life with Rosamond were two images which had become more and more irreconcilable ever since the threat of privation had disclosed itself. But even if his resolves had forced the two images into combination, the useful preliminaries to that hard change were not visibly within reach. And though he had not given the promise which his wife had asked for, he did not go again to Trumbull. He even began to think of taking a rapid journey to the North and seeing Sir Godwin. He had once believed that nothing would urge him into making an application for money to his uncle, but he had not then known the full pressure of alternatives yet more disagreeable. He could not depend on the effect of a letter; it was only in an interview, however disagreeable this might be to himself, that he could give a thorough explanation and could test the effectiveness of kinship. No sooner had Lydgate begun to represent this step to himself as the easiest than there was a reaction of anger that he—he who had long ago determined to live aloof from such abject calculations, such self-interested anxiety about the inclinations and the pockets of men with whom he had been proud to have no aims in common—should have fallen not simply to their level, but to the level of soliciting them.

CHAPTER 65

One of us two must bowen douteless;
And, sith a man is more reasonable
Than woman is, ye [men] moste be suffrable.

—CHAUCER: *Canterbury Tales*

The bias of human nature to be slow in correspondence triumphs even over the present quickening in the general pace of things: what wonder then that in 1832 old Sir Godwin Lydgate was slow to write a letter which was of consequence to others rather than to himself? Nearly three weeks of the new year were gone, and Rosamond, awaiting an answer to her winning appeal, was every day disappointed. Lydgate, in total ignorance of her expectations, was seeing the bills come in and feeling that Dover's use of his advantage over other creditors was imminent. He had never mentioned to Rosamond his brooding purpose of going to Quallingham; he did not want to admit what would appear to her a concession to her wishes after indignant refusal until the last moment, but he was really expecting to set off soon. A slice of the railway would enable him to manage the whole journey and back in four days.

But one morning after Lydgate had gone out, a letter came addressed to him, which Rosamond saw clearly to be from Sir Godwin. She was full of hope. Perhaps there might be a particular note to her enclosed; but Lydgate was naturally addressed on the question of money or other aid, and the fact that he was written to, nay, the very delay in writing at all, seemed to certify that the answer was thoroughly compliant. She was too much excited by these thoughts to do anything but light stitching in a warm corner of the dining-room, with the outside of this momentous letter lying on the table before her. About twelve she heard her husband's step in the passage, and tripping to open the door, she said in her lightest tones, "Tertius, come in here; here is a letter for you."

"Ah?" he said, not taking off his hat but just turning her round within his arm to walk towards the spot where the letter lay. "My uncle Godwin!" he exclaimed, while Rosamond reseated herself and watched him as he opened the letter. She had expected him to be surprised.

While Lydgate's eyes glanced rapidly over the brief letter, she saw his face, usually of a pale brown, taking on a dry whiteness; with nostrils and lips quivering he tossed down the letter before her, and said violently, "It will be impossible to endure life with you if you will always be acting secretly—acting in opposition to me and hiding your actions."

He checked his speech and turned his back on her, then wheeled round and walked about, sat down, and got up again restlessly, grasping hard the objects deep down in his pockets. He was afraid of saying something irremediably cruel.

Rosamond too had changed colour as she read. The letter ran in this way:

> *Dear Tertius, Don't set your wife to write to me when you have anything to ask. It is a roundabout, wheedling sort of thing which I should not have credited you with. I never choose to write to a woman on matters of business. As to my supplying you with a thousand pounds, or only half that sum, I can do nothing of the sort. My own family drains me to the last penny. With two younger sons and three daughters, I am not likely to have cash to spare. You seem to have got through your own money pretty quickly and to have made a mess where you are; the sooner you go somewhere else the better. But I have nothing to do with men of your profession, and can't help you there. I did the best I could for you as guardian, and let you have your own way in taking to medicine. You might have gone into the army or the Church. Your money would have held out for that, and there would have been a surer ladder before you. Your uncle Charles has had a grudge against you for not going into his profession, but not I. I have always wished you well, but you must consider yourself on your own legs entirely now. Your affectionate uncle,*
>
> *Godwin Lydgate*

When Rosamond had finished reading the letter she sat quite still, with her hands folded before her, restraining any show of her keen disappointment and entrenching herself in quiet passivity under her husband's wrath. Lydgate paused in his movements, looked at her again, and said with biting severity, "Will this be enough to convince you of the harm you may do by secret meddling? Have you sense enough to recognize now your incompetence to judge and act for me—to interfere with your ignorance in affairs which it belongs to me to decide on?"

The words were hard, but this was not the first time that Lydgate had been frustrated by her. She did not look at him and made no reply.

"I had nearly resolved on going to Quallingham. It would have cost me pain enough to do it, yet it might have been of some use. But it has been of no use for me to think of anything. You have always been counteracting me secretly. You delude me with a false assent, and then I am at the mercy of your devices. If you mean to resist every wish I express, say so and defy me. I shall at least know what I am doing then."

It is a terrible moment in young lives when the closeness of love's bond has turned to this power of galling. In spite of Rosamond's self-control a tear fell silently and rolled over her lips. She still said nothing, but under that quietude was hidden an intense effect: she was in such entire disgust with her husband that she wished she had never seen him. Sir Godwin's rudeness towards her and utter want of feeling ranged him with Dover and all other creditors—disagreeable people who only thought of themselves and did not mind how annoying they were to her. Even her father was unkind and might have done more for them. In fact there was but one person in Rosamond's world whom she did not regard as

blameworthy, and that was the graceful creature with blond plaits and with little hands crossed before her, who had never expressed herself unbecomingly and had always acted for the best—the best naturally being what she best liked.

Lydgate, pausing and looking at her, began to feel that half-maddening sense of helplessness which comes over passionate people when their passion is met by an innocent-looking silence whose meek, victimized air seems to put them in the wrong and at last infects even the justest indignation with a doubt of its justice. He needed to recover the full sense that he was in the right by moderating his words.

"Can you not see, Rosamond," he began again, trying to be simply grave and not bitter, "that nothing can be so fatal as a want of openness and confidence between us? It has happened again and again that I have expressed a decided wish, and you have seemed to assent, yet after that you have secretly disobeyed my wish. In that way I can never know what I have to trust to. There would be some hope for us if you would admit this. Am I such an unreasonable, furious brute? Why should you not be open with me?"

Still silence.

"Will you only say that you have been mistaken and that I may depend on your not acting secretly in future?" said Lydgate urgently, but with something of request in his tone which Rosamond was quick to perceive. She spoke with coolness.

"I cannot possibly make admissions or promises in answer to such words as you have used towards me. I have not been accustomed to language of that kind. You have spoken of my 'secret meddling,' and my 'interfering ignorance,' and my 'false assent.' I have never expressed myself in that way to you, and I think that you ought to apologise. You spoke of its being impossible to live with me. Certainly you have not made my life pleasant to me of late. I think it was to be expected that I should try to avert some of the hardships which our marriage has brought on me." Another tear fell as Rosamond ceased speaking, and she pressed it away as quietly as the first.

Lydgate flung himself into a chair, feeling checkmated. What place was there in her mind for a remonstrance to lodge in? He laid down his hat, flung an arm over the back of his chair, and looked down for some moments without speaking. Rosamond had the double purchase over him of insensibility to the point of justice in his reproach and of sensibility to the undeniable hardships now present in her married life. Although her duplicity in the affair of the house had exceeded what he knew, and had really hindered the Plymdales from knowing of it, she had no consciousness that her action could rightly be called false. We are not obliged to identify our own acts according to a strict classification, any more than the materials of our grocery and clothes. Rosamond felt that she was aggrieved and that this was what Lydgate had to recognize.

As for him, the need of accommodating himself to her nature, which was inflexible in proportion to its negations, held him as with pincers. He had begun to have an alarmed foresight of her irrevocable loss of love for him and the consequent dreariness of their life. The ready fulness of his emotions made this dread alternate quickly with the first violent movements of his anger. It would assuredly have been a vain boast in him to say that he was her master.

"You have not made my life pleasant to me of late"; "the hardships which our marriage has brought on me"—these words were stinging his imagination as a pain makes an exaggerated dream. If he were not only to sink from his highest resolve, but to sink into the hideous fettering of domestic hate?

"Rosamond," he said, turning his eyes on her with a melancholy look, "you should allow for a man's words when he is disappointed and provoked. You and I cannot have opposite interests. I cannot part my happiness from yours. If I am angry with you, it is that you seem not to see how any concealment divides us. How could I wish to make anything hard to you either by my words or conduct? When I hurt you, I hurt part of my own life. I should never be angry with you if you would be quite open with me."

"I have only wished to prevent you from hurrying us into wretchedness without any necessity," said Rosamond, the tears coming again from a softened feeling now that her husband had softened. "It is so very hard to be disgraced here among all the people we know and to live in such a miserable way. I wish I had died with the baby."

She spoke and wept with that gentleness which makes such words and tears omnipotent over a loving-hearted man. Lydgate drew his chair near to hers and pressed her delicate head against his cheek with his powerful, tender hand. He only caressed her; he did not say anything, for what was there to say? He could not promise to shield her from the dreaded wretchedness, for he could see no sure means of doing so. When he left her to go out again, he told himself that it was ten times harder for her than for him: he had a life away from home and constant appeals to his activity on behalf of others. He wished to excuse everything in her if he could—but it was inevitable that in that excusing mood he should think of her as if she were an animal of another and feebler species. Nevertheless she had mastered him.

CHAPTER 66

'Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus,
Another thing to fall.

—*Measure for Measure*

Lydgate certainly had good reason to reflect on the service his practice did him in counteracting his personal cares. He had no longer free energy enough for spontaneous research and speculative thinking, but by the bedside of patients the direct, external calls on his judgement and sympathies brought the added impulse needed to draw him out of himself. It was not simply that beneficent harness of routine which enables silly men to live respectably and unhappy men to live calmly; it was a perpetual claim on the immediate fresh application of thought and on the consideration of another's need and trial. Many of us looking back through life would say that the kindest man we have ever known has been a medical man, or perhaps that surgeon whose fine tact, directed by deeply informed perception, has come to us in our need with a more sublime beneficence than that of miracle-workers. Some of that twice-blessed mercy was always with Lydgate in his work at the hospital or in private houses, serving better than any opiate to quiet and sustain him under his anxieties and his sense of mental degeneracy.

Mr. Farebrother's suspicion as to the opiate was true, however. Under the first galling pressure of foreseen difficulties and the first perception that his marriage, if it were not to be a yoked loneliness, must be a state of effort to go on loving without too much care about being loved, he had once or twice tried a dose of opium. But he had no hereditary constitutional craving after such transient escapes from the hauntings of misery. He was strong, could drink a great deal of wine, but did not care about it; and when the men round him were drinking spirits, he took sugar and water, having a contemptuous pity even for the earliest stages of excitement from drink. It was the same with gambling. He had looked on at a great deal of gambling in Paris, watching it as if it had been a disease. He was no more tempted by such winning than he was by drink. He had said to himself that the only winning he cared for must be attained by a conscious process of high, difficult combination tending towards a beneficent result. The power he longed for could not be represented by agitated fingers clutching a heap of coin or by the half-barbarous, half-idiotic triumph in the eyes of a man who sweeps within his arms the ventures of twenty chapfallen companions.

But just as he had tried opium, so his thought now began to turn upon gambling—not with appetite for its excitement, but with a sort of wistful inward gaze after that easy way of getting money which implied no asking and brought no responsibility. If he had been in London or Paris at that time, it is probable that such thoughts, seconded by opportunity, would have taken him into a gambling-house, no longer to watch the gamblers, but to watch with them in kindred eagerness. Repugnance would have been surmounted by the immense need to win if chance would be kind enough to let him. An incident which happened not very long after that airy notion of getting aid from his uncle had been excluded was a strong sign of the effect that might have followed any extant opportunity of gambling.

The billiard-room at the Green Dragon was the constant resort of a certain set, most of whom, like our acquaintance Mr. Bambridge, were regarded as men of pleasure. It was here that poor Fred Vincy had made part of his memorable debt, having lost money in betting and been obliged to borrow of that gay companion. It was generally known in Middlemarch that a good deal of money was lost and won in this way; and the consequent repute of the Green Dragon as a place of dissipation naturally heightened in some quarters the temptation to go there. Probably its regular visitants, like the initiates of freemasonry, wished that there were something a little more tremendous to keep to themselves concerning it; but they were not a closed community, and many decent seniors as well as juniors occasionally turned into the billiard-room to see what was going on. Lydgate, who had the muscular aptitude for billiards and was fond of the game, had once or twice in the early days after his arrival in Middlemarch taken his turn with the cue at the Green Dragon; but afterwards he had no leisure for the game and no inclination for the socialities there. One evening, however, he had occasion to seek Mr. Bambridge at that resort. The horse-dealer had engaged to get him a customer for his remaining good horse, for which Lydgate had determined to substitute a cheap hack, hoping by this reduction of style to get perhaps twenty pounds; and he cared now for every small sum as a help towards feeding the patience of his tradesmen. To run up to the billiard-room, as he was passing, would save time.

Mr. Bambridge was not yet come but would be sure to arrive by and by, said his friend Mr. Horrock; and Lydgate stayed, playing a game for the sake of passing the time. That evening he had the peculiar light in the eyes and the unusual vivacity which had been once noticed in him by Mr. Farebrother. The exceptional fact of his presence was much noticed in the room, where there was a good deal of Middlemarch company; and several lookers-on, as well as some of the players, were betting with animation. Lydgate was playing well and felt confident; the bets were dropping round him, and with a swift, glancing thought of the probable gain which might double the sum he was saving from his horse, he began to bet on his own play, and won again and again. Mr. Bambridge had come in, but Lydgate did not notice him. He was not only excited with his play, but visions were gleaming on him of going the next day to Brassing, where there was gambling on a grander scale to be had, and where, by one powerful snatch at the devil's bait, he might carry it off without the hook and buy his rescue from his daily solicitings.

He was still winning when two new visitors entered. One of them was a young Hawley, just come from his law studies in town, and the other was Fred Vincy, who had spent several evenings of late at this old haunt of his. Young Hawley, an accomplished billiard-player, brought a cool, fresh hand to the cue. But Fred Vincy, startled at seeing Lydgate and astonished to see him betting with an excited air, stood aside and kept out of the circle round the table.

Fred had been rewarding resolution by a little laxity of late. He had been working heartily for six months at all outdoor occupations under Mr. Garth, and by dint of severe practice had nearly mastered the defects of his handwriting, this practice being, perhaps, a little the less severe that it was often carried on in the evening at Mr. Garth's under the eyes of Mary. But the last fortnight Mary had been staying at Lowick parsonage with the ladies there during Mr. Farebrother's residence in Middlemarch, where he was carrying out some parochial plans; and Fred, not seeing anything more agreeable to do, had turned into the Green Dragon, partly to play at billiards, partly to taste the old flavour of discourse about horses, sport, and things in general, considered from a point of view which was not strenuously correct. He had not been out hunting once this season, had had no horse of his own to ride, and had gone from place to place chiefly with Mr. Garth in his gig or on the sober cob which Mr. Garth could lend him. It was a little too bad, Fred began to think, that he should be kept in the traces with more severity than if he had been a clergyman. "I will tell you what, Mistress Mary—it will be rather harder work to learn surveying and drawing plans than it would have been to write sermons," he had said, wishing her to appreciate what he went through for her sake; "and as to Hercules and Theseus, they were nothing to me. They had sport and never learned to write a book-keeping hand." And now, Mary being out of the way for a little while, Fred, like any other strong dog who cannot slip his collar, had pulled up the staple of his chain and made a small escape, not of course meaning to go fast or far. There could be no reason why he should not play at billiards, but he was determined not to bet. As to money just now, Fred had in his mind the heroic project of saving almost all of the eighty pounds that Mr. Garth offered him and returning it, which he could easily do by giving up all futile money-spending, since he had a superfluous stock of clothes and no expense in his board. In that way he could, in one year, go a good way towards repaying the ninety pounds of which he had deprived Mrs. Garth, unhappily at a time when she needed that sum more than she did now. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that on this evening, which was the fifth of his recent visits to the billiard-room, Fred had, not in his pocket, but in his mind, the ten pounds which he meant to reserve for himself from his half-year's salary (having before him the pleasure of carrying thirty to Mrs. Garth when Mary was likely to be come home again)—he had those ten pounds in his mind as a fund from which he might risk something if there were a chance of a good bet. Why? Well, when sovereigns were flying about, why shouldn't he catch a few? He would never go far along that road again; but a man likes to assure himself, and men of pleasure generally, what he could do in the way of mischief if he chose, and that if he abstains from making himself ill, or beggaring himself, or talking with the utmost looseness which the narrow limits of human capacity will allow, it is not because he is a spooney. Fred did not enter into formal reasons, which are a very artificial, inexact way of representing the tingling returns of old habit and the caprices of young blood; but there was lurking in him a prophetic sense that evening that when he began to play he should also begin to bet—that he should enjoy some punch-drinking and in general prepare himself for feeling "rather seedy" in the morning. It is in such indefinable movements that action often begins.

But the last thing likely to have entered Fred's expectation was that he should see his brother-in-law, Lydgate—of whom he had never quite dropped the old opinion that he was a prig and tremendously conscious of his superiority—looking excited and betting, just as he himself might have done. Fred felt a shock greater than he could quite account for by the vague knowledge that Lydgate was in debt and that his father had refused to help him; and his own inclination to enter into the play was suddenly checked. It was a strange reversal of attitudes: Fred's blond face and blue eyes, usually bright and careless, ready to give attention to anything that held out a promise of amusement, looking involuntarily grave and almost embarrassed as if by the sight of something unfitting; while Lydgate, who had habitually an air of self-possessed strength and a certain meditativeness that seemed to lie behind his most observant attention, was acting, watching, speaking with that excited narrow consciousness which reminds one of an animal with fierce eyes and retractile claws.

Lydgate, by betting on his own strokes, had won sixteen pounds; but young Hawley's arrival had changed the poise of things. He made first-rate strokes himself and began to bet against Lydgate's strokes, the strain of whose nerves was thus changed from simple confidence in his own movements to defying another person's doubt in them. The defiance was more exciting than the confidence, but it was less sure. He continued to bet on his own play, but began often to fail. Still he went on, for his mind was as utterly narrowed into that precipitous crevice of play as if he had been the most ignorant lounger there. Fred observed that Lydgate was losing fast and found himself in the new situation of puzzling his brains to think of some device by which, without being offensive, he could withdraw Lydgate's attention and perhaps suggest to him a reason for quitting the room. He saw that others were observing Lydgate's strange unlikeness to himself, and it occurred to him that merely to touch his elbow and call him aside for a moment might rouse him from his absorption. He could think of nothing cleverer than the daring improbability of saying that he wanted to see Rosy and wished to know if she were at home this evening; and he was going desperately to carry out this weak device when a waiter came up to him with a message, saying that Mr. Farebrother was below and begged to speak with him.

Fred was surprised, not quite comfortably, but sending word that he would be down immediately, he went with a new impulse up to Lydgate, said, "Can I speak to you a moment?" and drew him aside.

"Farebrother has just sent up a message to say that he wants to speak to me. He is below. I thought you might like to know he was there if you had anything to say to him."

Fred had simply snatched up this pretext for speaking because he could not say, "You are losing confoundedly and are making everybody stare at you; you had better come away." But inspiration could hardly have served him better. Lydgate had not before seen that Fred was present, and his sudden appearance with an announcement of Mr. Farebrother had the effect of a sharp concussion.

"No, no," said Lydgate; "I have nothing particular to say to him. But—the game is up—I must be going—I came in just to see Bambridge."

"Bambridge is over there, but he is making a row—I don't think he's ready for business. Come down with me to

Farebrother. I expect he is going to blow me up, and you will shield me," said Fred with some adroitness.

Lydgate felt shame, but could not bear to act as if he felt it by refusing to see Mr. Farebrother; and he went down. They merely shook hands, however, and spoke of the frost; and when all three had turned into the street, the vicar seemed quite willing to say good-bye to Lydgate. His present purpose was clearly to talk with Fred alone, and he said kindly, "I disturbed you, young gentleman, because I have some pressing business with you. Walk with me to St. Botolph's, will you?"

It was a fine night, the sky thick with stars, and Mr. Farebrother proposed that they should make a circuit to the old church by the London road. The next thing he said was, "I thought Lydgate never went to the Green Dragon?"

"So did I," said Fred. "But he said that he went to see Bambridge."

"He was not playing, then?"

Fred had not meant to tell this, but he was obliged now to say, "Yes, he was. But I suppose it was an accidental thing. I have never seen him there before."

"You have been going often yourself, then, lately?"

"Oh, about five or six times."

"I think you had some good reason for giving up the habit of going there?"

"Yes. You know all about it," said Fred, not liking to be catechized in this way. "I made a clean breast to you."

"I suppose that gives me a warrant to speak about the matter now. It is understood between us, is it not, that we are on a footing of open friendship? I have listened to you, and you will be willing to listen to me. I may take my turn in talking a little about myself?"

"I am under the deepest obligation to you, Mr. Farebrother," said Fred in a state of uncomfortable surmise.

"I will not affect to deny that you are under some obligation to me. But I am going to confess to you, Fred, that I have been tempted to reverse all that by keeping silence with you just now. When somebody said to me, 'Young Vincy has taken to being at the billiard-table every night again—he won't bear the curb long,' I was tempted to do the opposite of what I am doing—to hold my tongue and wait while you went down the ladder again, betting first and then—"

"I have not made any bets," said Fred hastily.

"Glad to hear it. But I say, my prompting was to look on and see you take the wrong turning, wear out Garth's patience, and lose the best opportunity of your life—the opportunity which you made some rather difficult effort to secure. You can guess the feeling which raised that temptation in me—I am sure you know it. I am sure you know that the satisfaction of your affections stands in the way of mine."

There was a pause. Mr. Farebrother seemed to wait for a recognition of the fact, and the emotion perceptible in the tones of his fine voice gave solemnity to his words. But no feeling could quell Fred's alarm.

"I could not be expected to give her up," he said after a moment's hesitation; it was not a case for any pretence of generosity.

"Clearly not, when her affection met yours. But relations of this sort, even when they are of long standing, are always liable to change. I can easily conceive that you might act in a way to loosen the tie she feels towards you—it must be remembered that she is only conditionally bound to you—and in that case another man, who may flatter himself that he has a hold on her regard, might succeed in winning that firm place in her love as well as respect which you had let slip. I can easily conceive such a result," repeated Mr. Farebrother emphatically. "There is a companionship of ready sympathy which might get the advantage even over the longest associations."

It seemed to Fred that if Mr. Farebrother had had a beak and talons instead of his very capable tongue, his mode of attack could hardly be more cruel. He had a horrible conviction that behind all this hypothetic statement there was a knowledge of some actual change in Mary's feeling.

"Of course I know it might easily be all up with me," he said in a troubled voice. "If she is beginning to compare—" He broke off, not liking to betray all he felt, and then said, by the help of a little bitterness, "But I thought you were friendly to me."

"So I am; that is why we are here. But I have had a strong disposition to be otherwise. I have said to myself, 'If there is a likelihood of that youngster doing himself harm, why should you interfere? Aren't you worth as much as he is, and don't your sixteen years over and above his, in which you have gone rather hungry, give you more right to satisfaction than he has? If there's a chance of his going to the dogs, let him—perhaps you could nohow hinder it—and do you take the benefit.'"

There was a pause, in which Fred was seized by a most uncomfortable chill. What was coming next? He dreaded to hear that something had been said to Mary—he felt as if he were listening to a threat rather than a warning. When the vicar began again there was a change in his tone like the encouraging transition to a major key.

"But I had once meant better than that, and I am come back to my old intention. I thought that I could hardly *secure myself* in it better, Fred, than by telling you just what had gone on in me. And now, do you understand me? I want you to make the happiness of her life and your own, and if there is any chance that a word of warning from me may turn aside any risk to the contrary—well, I have uttered it."

There was a drop in the vicar's voice when he spoke the last words. He paused—they were standing on a patch of green where the road diverged towards St. Botolph's, and he put out his hand as if to imply that the conversation was closed. Fred was moved quite newly. Someone highly susceptible to the contemplation of a fine act has said that it produces a sort of regenerating shudder through the frame and makes one feel ready to begin a new life. A good degree of that effect was just then present in Fred Vincy.

"I will try to be worthy," he said, breaking off before he could say "of you as well as of her." And meanwhile Mr. Farebrother had gathered the impulse to say something more.

"You must not imagine that I believe there is at present any decline in her preference of you, Fred. Set your heart at rest that if you keep right, other things will keep right."

"I shall never forget what you have done," Fred answered. "I can't say anything that seems worth saying—only I will try that your goodness shall not be thrown away."

“That’s enough. Good-bye, and God bless you.”

In that way they parted. But both of them walked about a long while before they went out of the starlight. Much of Fred’s rumination might be summed up in the words, “It certainly would have been a fine thing for her to marry Farebrother—but if she loves me best and I am a good husband?”

Perhaps Mr. Farebrother’s might be concentrated into a single shrug and one little speech. “To think of the part one little woman can play in the life of a man, so that to renounce her may be a very good imitation of heroism, and to win her may be a discipline!”

CHAPTER 67

Now is there civil war within the soul;
Resolve is thrust from off the sacred throne
By clamorous Needs, and Pride the grand-vizier
Makes humble compact, plays the supple part
Of envoy and deft-tongued apologist
For hungry rebels.

Happily Lydgate had ended by losing in the billiard-room and brought away no encouragement to make a raid on luck. On the contrary, he felt unmixed disgust with himself the next day when he had to pay four or five pounds over and above his gains, and he carried about with him a most unpleasant vision of the figure he had made, not only rubbing elbows with the men at the Green Dragon but behaving just as they did. A philosopher fallen to betting is hardly distinguishable from a Philistine under the same circumstances: the difference will chiefly be found in his subsequent reflections, and Lydgate chewed a very disagreeable cud in that way. His reason told him how the affair might have been magnified into ruin by a slight change of scenery—if it had been a gambling-house that he had turned into, where chance could be clutched with both hands instead of being picked up with thumb and forefinger. Nevertheless, though reason strangled the desire to gamble, there remained the feeling that with an assurance of luck to the needful amount, he would have liked to gamble rather than take the alternative which was beginning to urge itself as inevitable.

That alternative was to apply to Mr. Bulstrode. Lydgate had so many times boasted both to himself and others that he was totally independent of Bulstrode, to whose plans he had lent himself solely because they enabled him to carry out his own ideas of professional work and public benefit—he had so constantly in their personal intercourse had his pride sustained by the sense that he was making a good social use of this predominating banker, whose opinions he thought contemptible and whose motives often seemed to him an absurd mixture of contradictory impressions—that he had been creating for himself strong ideal obstacles to the proffering of any considerable request to him on his own account.

Still, early in March his affairs were at that pass in which men begin to say that their oaths were delivered in ignorance and to perceive that the act which they had called impossible to them is becoming manifestly possible. With Dover's ugly security soon to be put in force, with the proceeds of his practice immediately absorbed in paying back debts, and with the chance, if the worst were known, of daily supplies being refused on credit, above all with the vision of Rosamond's hopeless discontent continually haunting him, Lydgate had begun to see that he should inevitably bend himself to ask help from somebody or other. At first he had considered whether he should write to Mr. Vincy, but on questioning Rosamond he found that, as he had suspected, she had already applied twice to her father, the last time being since the disappointment from Sir Godwin; and Papa had said that Lydgate must look out for himself. Papa said he had come, with one bad year after another, to trade more and more on borrowed capital and had had to give up many indulgences; he could not spare a single hundred from the charges of his family. He said, let Lydgate ask Bulstrode: they have always been hand and glove.

Indeed, Lydgate himself had come to the conclusion that if he must end by asking for a free loan, his relations with Bulstrode, more at least than with any other man, might take the shape of a claim which was not purely personal. Bulstrode had indirectly helped to cause the failure of his practice and had also been highly gratified by getting a medical partner in his plans; but who among us ever reduced himself to the sort of dependence in which Lydgate now stood without trying to believe that he had claims which diminished the humiliation of asking? It was true that of late there had seemed to be a new languor of interest in Bulstrode about the hospital, but his health had got worse and showed signs of a deep-seated nervous affection. In other respects he did not appear to be changed; he had always been highly polite, but Lydgate had observed in him from the first a marked coldness about his marriage and other private circumstances, a coldness which he had hitherto preferred to any warmth of familiarity between them. He deferred the intention from day to day, his habit of acting on his conclusions being made infirm by his repugnance to every possible conclusion and its consequent act. He saw Mr. Bulstrode often, but he did not try to use any occasion for his private purpose. At one moment he thought, "I will write a letter; I prefer that to any circuitous talk"; at another he thought, "No, if I were talking to him I could make a retreat before any signs of disinclination."

Still the days passed and no letter was written, no special interview sought. In his shrinking from the humiliation of a dependent attitude towards Bulstrode, he began to familiarize his imagination with another step even more unlike his remembered self. He began spontaneously to consider whether it would be possible to carry out that puerile notion of Rosamond's which had often made him angry, namely, that they should quit Middlemarch without seeing anything beyond that preface. The question came—"Would any man buy the practice of me even now, for as little as it is worth? Then the sale might happen as a necessary preparation for going away."

But against his taking this step, which he still felt to be a contemptible relinquishment of present work, a guilty turning aside from what was a real and might be a widening channel for worthy activity, to start again without any justified destination, there was this obstacle, that the purchaser, if procurable at all, might not be quickly forthcoming. And afterwards? Rosamond in a poor lodging, though in the largest city or most distant town, would not find the life that could save her from gloom and save him from the reproach of having plunged her into it. For when a man is at the foot of the

hill in his fortunes, he may stay a long while there in spite of professional accomplishment. In the British climate there is no incompatibility between scientific insight and furnished lodgings; the incompatibility is chiefly between scientific ambition and a wife who objects to that kind of residence.

But in the midst of his hesitation, opportunity came to decide him. A note from Mr. Bulstrode requested Lydgate to call on him at the bank. A hypochondriacal tendency had shown itself in the banker's constitution of late, and a lack of sleep, which was really only a slight exaggeration of an habitual dyspeptic symptom, had been dwelt on by him as a sign of threatening insanity. He wanted to consult Lydgate without delay on that particular morning, although he had nothing to tell beyond what he had told before. He listened eagerly to what Lydgate had to say in dissipation of his fears, though this too was only repetition; and this moment in which Bulstrode was receiving a medical opinion with a sense of comfort seemed to make the communication of a personal need to him easier than it had been in Lydgate's contemplation beforehand. He had been insisting that it would be well for Mr. Bulstrode to relax his attention to business.

"One sees how any mental strain, however slight, may affect a delicate frame," said Lydgate at that stage of the consultation when the remarks tend to pass from the personal to the general, "by the deep stamp which anxiety will make for a time even on the young and vigorous. I am naturally very strong, yet I have been thoroughly shaken lately by an accumulation of trouble."

"I presume that a constitution in the susceptible state in which mine at present is would be especially liable to fall a victim to cholera if it visited our district. And since its appearance near London, we may well besiege the mercy-seat for our protection," said Mr. Bulstrode, not intending to evade Lydgate's allusion, but really preoccupied with alarms about himself.

"You have at all events taken your share in using good practical precautions for the town, and that is the best mode of asking for protection," said Lydgate with a strong distaste for the broken metaphor and bad logic of the banker's religion, somewhat increased by the apparent deafness of his sympathy. But his mind had taken up its long-prepared movement towards getting help and was not yet arrested. He added, "The town has done well in the way of cleansing and finding appliances, and I think that if the cholera should come, even our enemies will admit that the arrangements in the hospital are a public good."

"Truly," said Mr. Bulstrode with some coldness. "With regard to what you say, Mr. Lydgate, about the relaxation of my mental labour, I have for some time been entertaining a purpose to that effect—a purpose of a very decided character. I contemplate at least a temporary withdrawal from the management of much business, whether benevolent or commercial. Also I think of changing my residence for a time; probably I shall close or let the Shrubs and take some place near the coast—under advice, of course, as to salubrity. That would be a measure which you would recommend?"

"Oh yes," said Lydgate, falling backward in his chair with ill-repressed impatience under the banker's pale, earnest eyes and intense preoccupation with himself.

"I have for some time felt that I should open this subject with you in relation to our hospital," continued Bulstrode. "Under the circumstances I have indicated, of course I must cease to have any personal share in the management, and it is contrary to my views of responsibility to continue a large application of means to an institution which I cannot watch over and to some extent regulate. I shall therefore, in case of my ultimate decision to leave Middlemarch, consider that I withdraw other support to the new hospital than that which will subsist in the fact that I chiefly supplied the expenses of building it and have contributed further large sums to its successful working."

Lydgate's thought when Bulstrode paused according to his wont was, "He has perhaps been losing a good deal of money." This was the most plausible explanation of a speech which had caused rather a startling change in his expectations. He said in reply, "The loss to the hospital can hardly be made up, I fear."

"Hardly," returned Bulstrode in the same deliberate, silvery tone; "except by some changes of plan. The only person who may be certainly counted on as willing to increase her contributions is Mrs. Casaubon. I have had an interview with her on the subject, and I have pointed out to her, as I am about to do to you, that it will be desirable to win a more general support to the new hospital by a change of system."

Another pause, but Lydgate did not speak.

"The change I mean is an amalgamation with the infirmary, so that the new hospital shall be regarded as a special addition to the elder institution, having the same directing board. It will be necessary, also, that the medical management of the two shall be combined. In this way any difficulty as to the adequate maintenance of our new establishment will be removed; the benevolent interests of the town will cease to be divided."

Mr. Bulstrode had lowered his eyes from Lydgate's face to the buttons of his coat as he again paused.

"No doubt that is a good device as to ways and means," said Lydgate with an edge of irony in his tone. "But I can't be expected to rejoice in it at once, since one of the first results will be that the other medical men will upset or interrupt my methods, if it were only because they are mine."

"I myself, as you know, Mr. Lydgate, highly valued the opportunity of new and independent procedure which you have diligently employed; the original plan, I confess, was one which I had much at heart, under submission to the Divine will. But since providential indications demand a renunciation from me, I renounce."

Bulstrode showed a rather exasperating ability in this conversation. The broken metaphor and bad logic of motive which had stirred his hearer's contempt were quite consistent with a mode of putting the facts which made it difficult for Lydgate to vent his own indignation and disappointment. After some rapid reflection, he only asked, "What did Mrs. Casaubon say?"

"That was the further statement which I wished to make to you," said Bulstrode, who had thoroughly prepared his ministerial explanation. "She is, you are aware, a woman of most munificent disposition, and happily in possession—not I presume of great wealth, but of funds which she can well spare. She has informed me that though she had destined the chief part of those funds to another purpose, she is willing to consider whether she cannot fully take my place in relation to the hospital. But she wishes for ample time to mature her thoughts on the subject, and I have told her that there is no need for haste—that, in fact, my own plans are not yet absolute."

Lydgate was ready to say, “If Mrs. Casaubon would take your place, there would be gain, instead of loss.” But there was still a weight on his mind which arrested this cheerful candour. He replied, “I suppose, then, that I may enter into the subject with Mrs. Casaubon.”

“Precisely; that is what she expressly desires. Her decision, she says, will much depend on what you can tell her. But not at present; she is, I believe, just setting out on a journey. I have her letter here,” said Mr. Bulstrode, drawing it out and reading from it. “‘I am immediately otherwise engaged,’ she says. ‘I am going into Yorkshire with Sir James and Lady Chettam, and the conclusions I come to about some land which I am to see there may affect my power of contributing to the hospital.’ Thus, Mr. Lydgate, there is no haste necessary in this matter; but I wished to apprise you beforehand of what may possibly occur.”

Mr. Bulstrode returned the letter to his side pocket and changed his attitude as if his business were closed. Lydgate, whose renewed hope about the hospital only made him more conscious of the facts which poisoned his hope, felt that his effort after help, if made at all, must be made now and vigorously.

“I am much obliged to you for giving me full notice,” he said with a firm intention in his tone, yet with an interruptedness in his delivery which showed that he spoke unwillingly. “The highest object to me is my profession, and I had identified the hospital with the best use I can at present make of my profession. But the best use is not always the same with monetary success. Everything which has made the hospital unpopular has helped with other causes—I think they are all connected with my professional zeal—to make me unpopular as a practitioner. I get chiefly patients who can’t pay me. I should like them best if I had nobody to pay on my own side.” Lydgate waited a little, but Bulstrode only bowed, looking at him fixedly, and he went on with the same interrupted enunciation, as if he were biting an objectionable leek.

“I have slipped into money difficulties which I can see no way out of unless someone who trusts me and my future will advance me a sum without other security. I had very little fortune left when I came here. I have no prospects of money from my own family. My expenses, in consequence of my marriage, have been very much greater than I had expected. The result at this moment is that it would take a thousand pounds to clear me. I mean, to free me from the risk of having all my goods sold in security of my largest debt—as well as to pay my other debts—and leave anything to keep us a little beforehand with our small income. I find that it is out of the question that my wife’s father should make such an advance. That is why I mention my position to—to the only other man who may be held to have some personal connexion with my prosperity or ruin.”

Lydgate hated to hear himself. But he had spoken now and had spoken with unmistakable directness. Mr. Bulstrode replied without haste, but also without hesitation.

“I am grieved, though, I confess, not surprised by this information, Mr. Lydgate. For my own part, I regretted your alliance with my brother-in-law’s family, which has always been of prodigal habits and which has already been much indebted to me for sustainment in its present position. My advice to you, Mr. Lydgate, would be that instead of involving yourself in further obligations and continuing a doubtful struggle, you should simply become a bankrupt.”

“That would not improve my prospect,” said Lydgate, rising and speaking bitterly, “even if it were a more agreeable thing in itself.”

“It is always a trial,” said Mr. Bulstrode; “but trial, my dear sir, is our portion here and is a needed corrective. I recommend you to weigh the advice I have given.”

“Thank you,” said Lydgate, not quite knowing what he said. “I have occupied you too long. Good-day.”

CHAPTER 68

What suit of grace hath Virtue to put on
If Vice shall wear as good, and do as well?
If Wrong, if Craft, if Indiscretion
Act as fair parts with ends as laudable?
Which all this mighty volume of events
The world, the universal map of deeds,
Strongly controls, and proves from all descents,
That the directest course still best succeeds.
For should not grave and learn'd Experience
That looks with the eyes of all the world beside,
And with all ages holds intelligence,
Go safer than Deceit without a guide!

—DANIEL: *Musophilus*

That change of plan and shifting of interest which Bulstrode stated or betrayed in his conversation with Lydgate had been determined in him by some severe experience which he had gone through since the epoch of Mr. Larcher's sale, when Raffles had recognized Will Ladislaw and when the banker had in vain attempted an act of restitution which might move Divine Providence to arrest painful consequences.

His certainty that Raffles, unless he were dead, would return to Middlemarch before long had been justified. On Christmas Eve he had reappeared at the Shrubs. Bulstrode was at home to receive him and hinder his communication with the rest of the family, but he could not altogether hinder the circumstances of the visit from compromising himself and alarming his wife. Raffles proved more unmanageable than he had shown himself to be in his former appearances, his chronic state of mental restlessness, the growing effect of habitual intemperance, quickly shaking off every impression from what was said to him. He insisted on staying in the house, and Bulstrode, weighing two sets of evils, felt that this was at least not a worse alternative than his going into the town. He kept him in his own room for the evening and saw him to bed, Raffles all the while amusing himself with the annoyance he was causing this decent and highly prosperous fellow-sinner, an amusement which he facetiously expressed as sympathy with his friend's pleasure in entertaining a man who had been serviceable to him and who had not had all his earnings. There was a cunning calculation under this noisy joking—a cool resolve to extract something the handsomer from Bulstrode as payment for release from this new application of torture. But his cunning had a little overcast its mark.

Bulstrode was indeed more tortured than the coarse fibre of Raffles could enable him to imagine. He had told his wife that he was simply taking care of this wretched creature, the victim of vice, who might otherwise injure himself; he implied, without the direct form of falsehood, that there was a family tie which bound him to this care and that there were signs of mental alienation in Raffles which urged caution. He would himself drive the unfortunate being away the next morning. In these hints he felt that he was supplying Mrs. Bulstrode with precautionary information for his daughters and servants and accounting for his allowing no one but himself to enter the room even with food and drink. But he sat in an agony of fear lest Raffles should be overheard in his loud and plain references to past facts—lest Mrs. Bulstrode should even be tempted to listen at the door. How could he hinder her, how betray his terror by opening the door to detect her? She was a woman of honest, direct habits and little likely to take so low a course in order to arrive at painful knowledge; but fear was stronger than the calculation of probabilities.

In this way Raffles had pushed the torture too far and produced an effect which had not been in his plan. By showing himself hopelessly unmanageable he had made Bulstrode feel that a strong defiance was the only resource left. After taking Raffles to bed that night the banker ordered his closed carriage to be ready at half-past seven the next morning. At six o'clock he had already been long dressed and had spent some of his wretchedness in prayer, pleading his motives for averting the worst evil if in anything he had used falsity and spoken what was not true before God. For Bulstrode shrank from a direct lie with an intensity disproportionate to the number of his more indirect misdeeds. But many of these misdeeds were like the subtle muscular movements which are not taken account of in the consciousness, though they bring about the end that we fix our mind on and desire. And it is only what we are vividly conscious of that we can vividly imagine to be seen by omniscience.

Bulstrode carried his candle to the bedside of Raffles, who was apparently in a painful dream. He stood silent, hoping that the presence of the light would serve to waken the sleeper gradually and gently, for he feared some noise as the consequence of a too sudden awakening. He had watched for a couple of minutes or more the shudderings and pantings which seemed likely to end in waking, when Raffles, with a long, half-stifled moan, started up and stared round him in terror, trembling and gasping. But he made no further noise, and Bulstrode, setting down the candle, awaited his recovery.

It was a quarter of an hour later before Bulstrode, with a cold peremptoriness of manner which he had not before shown, said, "I came to call you thus early, Mr. Raffles, because I have ordered the carriage to be ready at half-past seven and intend myself to conduct you as far as Ilsely, where you can either take the railway or await a coach."

Raffles was about to speak, but Bulstrode anticipated him imperiously with the words, "Be silent, sir, and hear what I have to say. I shall supply you with money now, and I will furnish you with a reasonable sum from time to time, on your

application to me by letter; but if you choose to present yourself here again, if you return to Middlemarch, if you use your tongue in a manner injurious to me, you will have to live on such fruits as your malice can bring you, without help from me. Nobody will pay you well for blasting my name; I know the worst you can do against me, and I shall brave it if you dare to thrust yourself upon me again. Get up, sir, and do as I order you, without noise, or I will send for a policeman to take you off my premises, and you may carry your stories into every pot-house in the town, but you shall have no sixpence from me to pay your expenses there."

Bulstrode had rarely in his life spoken with such nervous energy; he had been deliberating on this speech and its probable effects through a large part of the night; and though he did not trust to its ultimately saving him from any return of Raffles, he had concluded that it was the best throw he could make. It succeeded in enforcing submission from the jaded man this morning; his empoisoned system at this moment quailed before Bulstrode's cold, resolute bearing, and he was taken off quietly in the carriage before the family breakfast-time. The servants imagined him to be a poor relation and were not surprised that a strict man like their master, who held his head high in the world, should be ashamed of such a cousin and want to get rid of him. The banker's drive of ten miles with his hated companion was a dreary beginning of the Christmas day; but at the end of the drive, Raffles had recovered his spirits and parted in a contentment for which there was the good reason that the banker had given him a hundred pounds. Various motives urged Bulstrode to this open-handedness, but he did not himself inquire closely into all of them. As he had stood watching Raffles in his uneasy sleep, it had certainly entered his mind that the man had been much shattered since the first gift of two hundred pounds.

He had taken care to repeat the incisive statement of his resolve not to be played on any more, and had tried to penetrate Raffles with the fact that he had shown the risks of bribing him to be quite equal to the risks of defying him. But when, freed from his repulsive presence, Bulstrode returned to his quiet home, he brought with him no confidence that he had secured more than a respite. It was as if he had had a loathsome dream and could not shake off its images with their hateful kindred of sensations—as if on all the pleasant surroundings of his life a dangerous reptile had left his slimy traces.

Who can know how much of his most inward life is made up of the thoughts he believes other men to have about him, until that fabric of opinion is threatened with ruin?

Bulstrode was only the more conscious that there was a deposit of uneasy presentiment in his wife's mind because she carefully avoided any allusion to it. He had been used every day to taste the flavour of supremacy and the tribute of complete deference, and the certainty that he was watched or measured with a hidden suspicion of his having some discreditable secret made his voice totter when he was speaking to edification. Foreseeing, to men of Bulstrode's anxious temperament, is often worse than seeing; and his imagination continually heightened the anguish of an imminent disgrace. Yes, imminent; for if his defiance of Raffles did not keep the man away—and though he prayed for this result he hardly hoped for it—the disgrace was certain. In vain he said to himself that, if permitted, it would be a divine visitation, a chastisement, a preparation; he recoiled from the imagined burning; and he judged that it must be more for the divine glory that he should escape dishonour. That recoil had at last urged him to make preparations for quitting Middlemarch. If evil truth must be reported of him, he would then be at a less scorching distance from the contempt of his old neighbours; and in a new scene, where his life would not have gathered the same wide sensibility, the tormentor, if he pursued him, would be less formidable. To leave the place finally would, he knew, be extremely painful to his wife, and on other grounds he would have preferred to stay where he had struck root. Hence he made his preparations at first in a conditional way, wishing to leave on all sides an opening for his return after brief absence if any favourable intervention of Providence should dissipate his fears. He was preparing to transfer his management of the bank and to give up any active control of other commercial affairs in the neighbourhood on the ground of his failing health, but without excluding his future resumption of such work. The measure would cause him some added expense and some diminution of income beyond what he had already undergone from the general depression of trade, and the hospital presented itself as a principal object of outlay on which he could fairly economize.

This was the experience which had determined his conversation with Lydgate. But at this time his arrangements had most of them gone no farther than a stage at which he could recall them if they proved to be unnecessary. He continually deferred the final steps; in the midst of his fears, like many a man who is in danger of shipwreck or of being dashed from his carriage by runaway horses, he had a clinging impression that something would happen to hinder the worst and that to spoil his life by a late transplantation might be over-hasty, especially since it was difficult to account satisfactorily to his wife for the project of their indefinite exile from the only place where she would like to live.

Among the affairs Bulstrode had to care for was the management of the farm at Stone Court in case of his absence; and on this as well as on all other matters connected with any houses and land he possessed in or about Middlemarch, he had consulted Caleb Garth. Like everyone else who had business of that sort, he wanted to get the agent who was more anxious for his employer's interests than his own. With regard to Stone Court, since Bulstrode wished to retain his hold on the stock and to have an arrangement by which he himself could, if he chose, resume his favourite recreation of superintendence, Caleb had advised him not to trust to a mere bailiff, but to let the land, stock and implements yearly and take a proportionate share of the proceeds.

"May I trust to you to find me a tenant on these terms, Mr. Garth?" said Bulstrode. "And will you mention to me the yearly sum which would repay you for managing these affairs which we have discussed together?"

"I'll think about it," said Caleb in his blunt way. "I'll see how I can make it out."

If it had not been that he had to consider Fred Vincy's future, Mr. Garth would not probably have been glad of any addition to his work, of which his wife was always fearing an excess for him as he grew older. But on quitting Bulstrode after that conversation, a very alluring idea occurred to him about this said letting of Stone Court. What if Bulstrode would agree to his placing Fred Vincy there on the understanding that he, Caleb Garth, should be responsible for the management? It would be an excellent schooling for Fred; he might make a modest income there and still have time left to get knowledge by helping in other business. He mentioned his notion to Mrs. Garth with such evident delight that she could not bear to chill his pleasure by expressing her constant fear of his undertaking too much.

"The lad would be as happy as two," he said, throwing himself back in his chair and looking radiant, "if I could tell him

it was all settled. Think, Susan! His mind had been running on that place for years before old Featherstone died. And it would be as pretty a turn of things as could be that he should hold the place in a good industrious way after all—by his taking to business. For it's likely enough Bulstrode might let him go on and gradually buy the stock. He hasn't made up his mind, I can see, whether or not he shall settle somewhere else as a lasting thing. I never was better pleased with a notion in my life. And then the children might be married by and by, Susan."

"You will not give any hint of the plan to Fred until you are sure that Bulstrode would agree to the plan?" said Mrs. Garth in a tone of gentle caution. "And as to marriage, Caleb, we old people need not help to hasten it."

"Oh, I don't know," said Caleb, swinging his head aside. "Marriage is a taming thing. Fred would want less of my bit and bridle. However, I shall say nothing till I know the ground I'm treading on. I shall speak to Bulstrode again."

He took his earliest opportunity of doing so. Bulstrode had anything but a warm interest in his nephew Fred Vincy, but he had a strong wish to secure Mr. Garth's services on many scattered points of business at which he was sure to be a considerable loser if they were under less conscientious management. On that ground he made no objection to Mr. Garth's proposal, and there was also another reason why he was not sorry to give a consent which was to benefit one of the Vincy family. It was that Mrs. Bulstrode, having heard of Lydgate's debts, had been anxious to know whether her husband could not do something for poor Rosamond, and had been much troubled on learning from him that Lydgate's affairs were not easily remediable and that the wisest plan was to let them "take their course." Mrs. Bulstrode had then said for the first time, "I think you are always a little hard towards my family, Nicholas. And I am sure I have no reason to deny any of my relatives. Too worldly they may be, but no one ever had to say that they were not respectable."

"My dear Harriet," said Mr. Bulstrode, wincing under his wife's eyes, which were filling with tears, "I have supplied your brother with a great deal of capital. I cannot be expected to take care of his married children."

That seemed to be true, and Mrs. Bulstrode's remonstrance subsided into pity for poor Rosamond, whose extravagant education she had always foreseen the fruits of.

But remembering that dialogue, Mr. Bulstrode felt that when he had to talk to his wife fully about his plan of quitting Middlemarch, he should be glad to tell her that he had made an arrangement which might be for the good of her nephew Fred. At present he had merely mentioned to her that he thought of shutting up the Shrubs for a few months and taking a house on the southern coast.

Hence Mr. Garth got the assurance he desired, namely, that in case of Bulstrode's departure from Middlemarch for an indefinite time, Fred Vincy should be allowed to have the tenancy of Stone Court on the terms proposed.

Caleb was so elated with his hope of this "neat turn" being given to things that if his self-control had not been braced by a little affectionate wifely scolding, he would have betrayed everything to Mary, wanting "to give the child comfort." However, he restrained himself and kept in strict privacy from Fred certain visits which he was making to Stone Court in order to look more thoroughly into the state of the land and stock and take a preliminary estimate. He was certainly more eager in these visits than the probable speed of events required him to be; but he was stimulated by a fatherly delight in occupying his mind with this bit of probable happiness which he held in store like a hidden birthday gift for Fred and Mary.

"But suppose the whole scheme should turn out to be a castle in the air?" said Mrs. Garth.

"Well, well," replied Caleb; "the castle will tumble about nobody's head."

CHAPTER 69

If thou hast heard a word, let it die with thee.

—*Ecclesiasticus*

Mr. Bulstrode was still seated in his manager's room at the bank, about three o'clock of the same day on which he had received Lydgate there, when the clerk entered to say that his horse was waiting and also that Mr. Garth was outside and begged to speak with him.

"By all means," said Bulstrode, and Caleb entered. "Pray sit down, Mr. Garth," continued the banker in his suavest tone. "I am glad that you arrived just in time to find me here. I know you count your minutes."

"Oh," said Caleb gently with a slow swing of his head on one side as he seated himself and laid his hat on the floor. He looked at the ground, leaning forward and letting his long fingers droop between his legs, while each finger moved in succession as if it were sharing some thought which filled his large, quiet brow.

Mr. Bulstrode, like everyone else who knew Caleb, was used to his slowness in beginning to speak on any topic which he felt to be important, and rather expected that he was about to recur to the buying of some houses in Blindman's Court for the sake of pulling them down as a sacrifice of property which would be well repaid by the influx of air and light on that spot. It was by propositions of this kind that Caleb was sometimes troublesome to his employers, but he had usually found Bulstrode ready to meet him in projects of improvement and they had got on well together. When he spoke again, however, it was to say in rather a subdued voice, "I have just come away from Stone Court, Mr. Bulstrode."

"You found nothing wrong there, I hope," said the banker; "I was there myself yesterday. Abel has done well with the lambs this year."

"Why, yes," said Caleb, looking up gravely, "there *is* something wrong—a stranger, who is very ill, I think. He wants a doctor, and I came to tell you of that. His name is Raffles."

He saw the shock of his words passing through Bulstrode's frame. On this subject the banker had thought that his fears were too constantly on the watch to be taken by surprise, but he had been mistaken.

"Poor wretch!" he said in a compassionate tone, though his lips trembled a little. "Do you know how he came there?"

"I took him myself," said Caleb quietly—"took him up in my gig. He had got down from the coach and was walking a little beyond the turning from the toll-house, and I overtook him. He remembered seeing me with you once before at Stone Court, and he asked me to take him on. I saw he was ill; it seemed to me the right thing to do, to carry him under shelter. And now I think you should lose no time in getting advice for him." Caleb took up his hat from the floor as he ended and rose slowly from his seat.

"Certainly," said Bulstrode, whose mind was very active at this moment. "Perhaps you will yourself oblige me, Mr. Garth, by calling at Mr. Lydgate's as you pass. Or, stay! He may at this hour probably be at the hospital. I will first send my man on the horse there with a note this instant, and then I will myself ride to Stone Court."

Bulstrode quickly wrote a note and went out himself to give the commission to his man. When he returned, Caleb was standing as before with one hand on the back of the chair, holding his hat with the other. In Bulstrode's mind the dominant thought was, "Perhaps Raffles only spoke to Garth of his illness. Garth may wonder, as he must have done before, at this disreputable fellow's claiming intimacy with me; but he will know nothing. And he is friendly to me; I can be of use to him."

He longed for some confirmation of this hopeful conjecture, but to have asked any question as to what Raffles had said or done would have been to betray fear.

"I am exceedingly obliged to you, Mr. Garth," he said in his usual tone of politeness. "My servant will be back in a few minutes, and I shall then go myself to see what can be done for this unfortunate man. Perhaps you had some other business with me? If so, pray be seated."

"Thank you," said Caleb, making a slight gesture with his right hand to waive the invitation. "I wish to say, Mr. Bulstrode, that I must request you to put your business into some other hands than mine. I am obliged to you for your handsome way of meeting me—about the letting of Stone Court, and all other business. But I must give it up."

A sharp certainty entered like a stab into Bulstrode's soul.

"This is sudden, Mr. Garth," was all he could say at first.

"It is," said Caleb; "but it is quite fixed. I must give it up."

He spoke with a firmness which was very gentle, and yet he could see that Bulstrode seemed to cower under that gentleness, his face looking dried and his eyes swerving away from the glance which rested on him. Caleb felt a deep pity for him, but he could have used no pretexts to account for his resolve, even if they would have been of any use.

"You have been led to this, I apprehend, by some slanders concerning me uttered by that unhappy creature," said Bulstrode, anxious now to know the utmost.

"That is true. I can't deny that I act upon what I heard from him."

"You are a conscientious man, Mr. Garth—a man, I trust, who feels himself accountable to God. You would not wish to injure me by being too ready to believe a slander," said Bulstrode, casting about for pleas that might be adapted to his

hearer's mind. "That is a poor reason for giving up a connexion which I think I may say will be mutually beneficial."

"I would injure no man if I could help it," said Caleb, "even if I thought God winked at it. I hope I should have a feeling for my fellow-creature. But, sir, I am obliged to believe that this Raffles has told me the truth. And I can't be happy in working with you, or profiting by you. It hurts my mind. I must beg you to seek another agent."

"Very well, Mr. Garth. But I must at least claim to know the worst that he has told you. I must know what is the foul speech that I am liable to be the victim of," said Bulstrode, a certain amount of anger beginning to mingle with his humiliation before this quiet man who renounced his benefits.

"That's needless," said Caleb, waving his hand, bowing his head slightly, and not swerving from the tone which had in it the merciful intention to spare this pitiable man. "What he has said to me will never pass from my lips unless something now unknown forces it from me. If you led a harmful life for gain and kept others out of their rights by deceit to get the more for yourself, I dare say you repent—you would like to go back, and can't: that must be a bitter thing." Caleb paused a moment and shook his head. "It is not for me to make your life harder to you."

"But you do—you do make it harder to me," said Bulstrode, constrained into a genuine, pleading cry. "You make it harder to me by turning your back on me."

"That I'm forced to do," said Caleb, still more gently, lifting up his hand. "I am sorry. I don't judge you and say, 'He is wicked, and I am righteous.' God forbid. I don't know everything. A man may do wrong, and his will may rise clear out of it, though he can't get his life clear. That's a bad punishment. If it is so with you—well, I'm very sorry for you. But I have that feeling inside me that I can't go on working with you. That's all, Mr. Bulstrode. Everything else is buried, so far as my will goes. And I wish you good-day."

"One moment, Mr. Garth!" said Bulstrode hurriedly. "I may trust then to your solemn assurance that you will not repeat either to man or woman what—even if it have any degree of truth in it—is yet a malicious representation?"

Caleb's wrath was stirred, and he said indignantly, "Why should I have said it if I didn't mean it? I am in no fear of you. Such tales as that will never tempt my tongue."

"Excuse me—I am agitated—I am the victim of this abandoned man."

"Stop a bit! You have got to consider whether you didn't help to make him worse when you profited by his vices."

"You are wronging me by too readily believing him," said Bulstrode, oppressed, as by a nightmare, with the inability to deny flatly what Raffles might have said and yet feeling it an escape that Caleb had not so stated it to him as to ask for that flat denial.

"No," said Caleb, lifting his hand deprecatingly; "I am ready to believe better when better is proved. I rob you of no good chance. As to speaking, I hold it a crime to expose a man's sin unless I'm clear it must be done to save the innocent. That is my way of thinking, Mr. Bulstrode; and what I say, I've no need to swear. I wish you good-day."

Some hours later, when he was at home, Caleb said to his wife incidentally that he had had some little differences with Bulstrode and that in consequence he had given up all notion of taking Stone Court, and indeed had resigned doing further business for him.

"He was disposed to interfere too much, was he?" said Mrs. Garth, imagining that her husband had been touched on his sensitive point and not been allowed to do what he thought right as to materials and modes of work.

"Oh," said Caleb, bowing his head and waving his hand gravely. And Mrs. Garth knew that this was a sign of his not intending to speak further on the subject.

As for Bulstrode, he had almost immediately mounted his horse and set off for Stone Court, being anxious to arrive there before Lydgate.

His mind was crowded with images and conjectures, which were a language to his hopes and fears, just as we hear tones from the vibrations which shake our whole system. The deep humiliation with which he had winced under Caleb Garth's knowledge of his past and rejection of his patronage alternated with and almost gave way to the sense of safety in the fact that Garth, and no other, had been the man to whom Raffles had spoken. It seemed to him a sort of earnest that Providence intended his rescue from worse consequences, the way being thus left open for the hope of secrecy. That Raffles should be afflicted with illness, that he should have been led to Stone Court rather than elsewhere—Bulstrode's heart fluttered at the vision of probabilities which these events conjured up. If it should turn out that he was freed from all danger of disgrace, if he could breathe in perfect liberty, his life should be more consecrated than it had ever been before. He mentally lifted up this vow as if it would urge the result he longed for; he tried to believe in the potency of that prayerful resolution, its potency to determine death. He knew that he ought to say, "Thy will be done"; and he said it often. But the intense desire remained that the will of God might be the death of that hated man.

Yet when he arrived at Stone Court he could not see the change in Raffles without a shock. But for his pallor and feebleness, Bulstrode would have called the change in him entirely mental. Instead of his loud tormenting mood, he showed an intense, vague terror and seemed to deprecate Bulstrode's anger because the money was all gone—he had been robbed—it had half of it been taken from him. He had only come here because he was ill and somebody was hunting him—somebody was after him; he had told nobody anything, he had kept his mouth shut. Bulstrode, not knowing the significance of these symptoms, interpreted this new nervous susceptibility into a means of alarming Raffles into true confessions and taxed him with falsehood in saying that he had not told anything, since he had just told the man who took him up in his gig and brought him to Stone Court. Raffles denied this with solemn adjurations, the fact being that the links of consciousness were interrupted in him and that his minute, terror-stricken narrative to Caleb Garth had been delivered under a set of visionary impulses which had dropped back into darkness.

Bulstrode's heart sank again at this sign that he could get no grasp over the wretched man's mind and that no word of Raffles could be trusted as to the fact which he most wanted to know, namely, whether or not he had really kept silence to everyone in the neighbourhood except Caleb Garth. The housekeeper had told him without the least constraint of manner that since Mr. Garth left, Raffles had asked her for beer and after that had not spoken, seeming very ill. On that side it might be concluded that there had been no betrayal. Mrs. Abel thought, like the servants at the Shrubs, that the strange man belonged to the unpleasant "kin" who are among the troubles of the rich; she had at first referred the kinship to Mr.

Rigg, and where there was property left, the buzzing presence of such large blue-bottles seemed natural enough. How he could be “kin” to Bulstrode as well was not so clear, but Mrs. Abel agreed with her husband that there was “no knowing,” a proposition which had a great deal of mental food for her so that she shook her head over it without further speculation.

In less than an hour Lydgate arrived. Bulstrode met him outside the wainscoted parlour, where Raffles was, and said, “I have called you in, Mr. Lydgate, to an unfortunate man who was once in my employment, many years ago. Afterwards he went to America and returned I fear to an idle, dissolute life. Being destitute, he has a claim on me. He was slightly connected with Rigg, the former owner of this place, and in consequence found his way here. I believe he is seriously ill; apparently his mind is affected. I feel bound to do the utmost for him.”

Lydgate, who had the remembrance of his last conversation with Bulstrode strongly upon him, was not disposed to say an unnecessary word to him and bowed slightly in answer to this account; but just before entering the room he turned automatically and said, “What is his name?” to know names being as much a part of the medical man’s accomplishment as of the practical politician’s.

“Raffles, John Raffles,” said Bulstrode, who hoped that whatever became of Raffles, Lydgate would never know any more of him.

When he had thoroughly examined and considered the patient, Lydgate ordered that he should go to bed and be kept there in as complete quiet as possible, and then went with Bulstrode into another room.

“It is a serious case, I apprehend,” said the banker before Lydgate began to speak.

“No—and yes,” said Lydgate, half dubiously. “It is difficult to decide as to the possible effect of long-standing complications, but the man had a robust constitution to begin with. I should not expect this attack to be fatal, though of course the system is in a ticklish state. He should be well watched and attended to.”

“I will remain here myself,” said Bulstrode. “Mrs. Abel and her husband are inexperienced. I can easily remain here for the night if you will oblige me by taking a note for Mrs. Bulstrode.”

“I should think that is hardly necessary,” said Lydgate. “He seems tame and terrified enough. He might become more unmanageable. But there is a man here, is there not?”

“I have more than once stayed here a few nights for the sake of seclusion,” said Bulstrode indifferently; “I am quite disposed to do so now. Mrs. Abel and her husband can relieve or aid me if necessary.”

“Very well. Then I need give my directions only to you,” said Lydgate, not feeling surprised at a little peculiarity in Bulstrode.

“You think, then, that the case is hopeful?” said Bulstrode when Lydgate had ended giving his orders.

“Unless there turn out to be further complications, such as I have not at present detected, yes,” said Lydgate. “He may pass on to a worse stage, but I should not wonder if he got better in a few days by adhering to the treatment I have prescribed. There must be firmness. Remember, if he calls for liquors of any sort, not to give them to him. In my opinion, men in his condition are oftener killed by treatment than by the disease. Still, new symptoms may arise. I shall come again tomorrow morning.”

After waiting for the note to be carried to Mrs. Bulstrode, Lydgate rode away, forming no conjectures, in the first instance, about the history of Raffles, but rehearsing the whole argument, which had lately been much stirred by the publication of Dr. Ware’s abundant experience in America, as to the right way of treating cases of alcoholic poisoning such as this. Lydgate, when abroad, had already been interested in this question; he was strongly convinced against the prevalent practice of allowing alcohol and persistently administering large doses of opium, and he had repeatedly acted on this conviction with a favourable result.

“The man is in a diseased state,” he thought, “but there’s a good deal of wear in him still. I suppose he is an object of charity to Bulstrode. It is curious what patches of hardness and tenderness lie side by side in men’s dispositions. Bulstrode seems the most unsympathetic fellow I ever saw about some people, and yet he has taken no end of trouble and spent a great deal of money on benevolent objects. I suppose he has some test by which he finds out whom heaven cares for—he has made up his mind that it doesn’t care for me.”

This streak of bitterness came from a plenteous source and kept widening in the current of his thought as he neared Lowick Gate. He had not been there since his first interview with Bulstrode in the morning, having been found at the hospital by the banker’s messenger; and for the first time he was returning to his home without the vision of any expedient in the background which left him a hope of raising money enough to deliver him from the coming destitution of everything which made his married life tolerable—everything which saved him and Rosamond from that bare isolation in which they would be forced to recognize how little of a comfort they could be to each other. It was more bearable to do without tenderness for himself than to see that his own tenderness could make no amends for the lack of other things to her. The sufferings of his own pride from humiliations past and to come were keen enough, yet they were hardly distinguishable to himself from that more acute pain which dominated them—the pain of foreseeing that Rosamond would come to regard him chiefly as the cause of disappointment and unhappiness to her. He had never liked the makeshifts of poverty and they had never before entered into his prospects for himself, but he was beginning now to imagine how two creatures who loved each other and had a stock of thoughts in common might laugh over their shabby furniture and their calculations how far they could afford butter and eggs. But the glimpse of that poetry seemed as far off from him as the carelessness of the golden age; in poor Rosamond’s mind there was not room enough for luxuries to look small in. He got down from his horse in a very sad mood and went into the house, not expecting to be cheered except by his dinner and reflecting that before the evening closed it would be wise to tell Rosamond of his application to Bulstrode and its failure. It would be well not to lose time in preparing her for the worst.

But his dinner waited long for him before he was able to eat it. For on entering he found that Dover’s agent had already put a man in the house, and when he asked where Mrs. Lydgate was, he was told that she was in her bedroom. He went up and found her stretched on the bed pale and silent, without an answer even in her face to any word or look of his. He sat down by the bed and leaning over her said with almost a cry of prayer, “Forgive me for this misery, my poor Rosamond! Let us only love one another.”

She looked at him silently, still with the blank despair on her face; but then the tears began to fill her blue eyes, and her lip trembled. The strong man had had too much to bear that day. He let his head fall beside hers and sobbed.

He did not hinder her from going to her father early in the morning—it seemed now that he ought not to hinder her from doing as she pleased. In half an hour she came back and said that Papa and Mamma wished her to go and stay with them while things were in this miserable state. Papa said he could do nothing about the debt—if he paid this, there would be half a dozen more. She had better come back home again till Lydgate had got a comfortable home for her. “Do you object, Tertius?”

“Do as you like,” said Lydgate. “But things are not coming to a crisis immediately. There is no hurry.”

“I should not go till tomorrow,” said Rosamond; “I shall want to pack my clothes.”

“Oh, I would wait a little longer than tomorrow; there is no knowing what may happen,” said Lydgate with bitter irony. “I may get my neck broken, and that may make things easier to you.”

It was Lydgate’s misfortune and Rosamond’s too that his tenderness towards her, which was both an emotional prompting and a well-considered resolve, was inevitably interrupted by these outbursts of indignation either ironical or remonstrant. She thought them totally unwarranted, and the repulsion which this exceptional severity excited in her was in danger of making the more persistent tenderness unacceptable.

“I see you do not wish me to go,” she said with chill mildness; “why can you not say so without that kind of violence? I shall stay until you request me to do otherwise.”

Lydgate said no more, but went out on his rounds. He felt bruised and shattered, and there was a dark line under his eyes which Rosamond had not seen before. She could not bear to look at him. Tertius had a way of taking things which made them a great deal worse for her.

CHAPTER 70

Our deeds still travel with us from afar,
And what we have been makes us what we are.

Bulstrode's first object after Lydgate had left Stone Court was to examine Raffles's pockets, which he imagined were sure to carry signs in the shape of hotel bills of the places he had stopped in if he had not told the truth in saying that he had come straight from Liverpool because he was ill and had no money. There were various bills crammed into his pocketbook, but none of a later date than Christmas at any other place, except one, which bore date that morning. This was crumpled up with a handbill about a horse-fair in one of his tail pockets and represented the cost of three days' stay at an inn at Bilkley, where the fair was held—a town at least forty miles from Middlemarch. The bill was heavy, and since Raffles had no luggage with him, it seemed probable that he had left his portmanteau behind in payment in order to save money for his travelling fare, for his purse was empty and he had only a couple of sixpences and some loose pence in his pockets.

Bulstrode gathered a sense of safety from these indications that Raffles had really kept at a distance from Middlemarch since his memorable visit at Christmas. At a distance and among people who were strangers to Bulstrode, what satisfaction could there be to Raffles's tormenting, self-magnifying vein in telling old scandalous stories about a Middlemarch banker? And what harm if he did talk? The chief point now was to keep watch over him as long as there was any danger of that intelligible raving, that unaccountable impulse to tell, which seemed to have acted towards Caleb Garth; and Bulstrode felt much anxiety lest some such impulse should come over him at the sight of Lydgate. He sat up alone with him through the night, only ordering the housekeeper to lie down in her clothes so as to be ready when he called her, alleging his own indisposition to sleep and his anxiety to carry out the doctor's orders. He did carry them out faithfully, although Raffles was incessantly asking for brandy and declaring that he was sinking away, that the earth was sinking away from under him. He was restless and sleepless but still quailing and manageable. On the offer of food ordered by Lydgate, which he refused, and the denial of other things which he demanded, he seemed to concentrate all his terror on Bulstrode, imploringly deprecating his anger, his revenge on him by starvation, and declaring with strong oaths that he had never told any mortal a word against him. Even this Bulstrode felt that he would not have liked Lydgate to hear; but a more alarming sign of fitful alternation in his delirium was that in the morning twilight Raffles suddenly seemed to imagine a doctor present, addressing him and declaring that Bulstrode wanted to starve him to death out of revenge for telling, when he never had told.

Bulstrode's native imperiousness and strength of determination served him well. This delicate-looking man, himself nervously perturbed, found the needed stimulus in his strenuous circumstances, and through that difficult night and morning, while he had the air of an animated corpse returned to movement without warmth, holding the mastery by its chill impassibility, his mind was intensely at work thinking of what he had to guard against and what would win him security. Whatever prayers he might lift up, whatever statements he might inwardly make of this man's wretched spiritual condition, and the duty he himself was under to submit to the punishment divinely appointed for him rather than to wish for evil to another—through all this effort to condense words into a solid mental state, there pierced and spread with irresistible vividness the images of the events he desired. And in the train of those images came their apology. He could not but see the death of Raffles, and see in it his own deliverance. What was the removal of this wretched creature? He was impenitent, but were not public criminals impenitent? Yet the law decided on their fate. Should Providence in this case award death, there was no sin in contemplating death as the desirable issue if he kept his hands from hastening it, if he scrupulously did what was prescribed. Even here there might be a mistake: human prescriptions were fallible things: Lydgate had said that treatment had hastened death; why not his own method of treatment? But of course intention was everything in the question of right and wrong.

And Bulstrode set himself to keep his intention separate from his desire. He inwardly declared that he intended to obey orders. Why should he have got into any argument about the validity of these orders? It was only the common trick of desire, which avails itself of any irrelevant scepticism, finding larger room for itself in all uncertainty about effects, in every obscurity that looks like the absence of law. Still, he did obey the orders.

His anxieties continually glanced towards Lydgate, and his remembrance of what had taken place between them the morning before was accompanied with sensibilities which had not been roused at all during the actual scene. He had then cared but little about Lydgate's painful impressions with regard to the suggested change in the hospital or about the disposition towards himself which what he held to be his justifiable refusal of a rather exorbitant request might call forth. He recurred to the scene now with a perception that he had probably made Lydgate his enemy, and with an awakened desire to propitiate him, or rather to create in him a strong sense of personal obligation. He regretted that he had not at once made even an unreasonable money sacrifice. For in case of unpleasant suspicions or even knowledge gathered from the ravings of Raffles, Bulstrode would have felt that he had a defence in Lydgate's mind by having conferred a momentous benefit on him. But the regret had perhaps come too late.

Strange, piteous conflict in the soul of this unhappy man, who had longed for years to be better than he was—who had taken his selfish passions into discipline and clad them in severe robes so that he had walked with them as a devout quire,

till now that a terror had risen among them, and they could chant no longer, but threw out their common cries for safety.

It was nearly the middle of the day before Lydgate arrived; he had meant to come earlier but had been detained he said; and his shattered looks were noticed by Bulstrode. But he immediately threw himself into the consideration of the patient and inquired strictly into all that had occurred. Raffles was worse, would take hardly any food, was persistently wakeful and restlessly raving, but still not violent. Contrary to Bulstrode's alarmed expectation, he took little notice of Lydgate's presence and continued to talk or murmur incoherently.

"What do you think of him?" said Bulstrode in private.

"The symptoms are worse."

"You are less hopeful?"

"No; I still think he may come round. Are you going to stay here yourself?" said Lydgate, looking at Bulstrode with an abrupt question, which made him uneasy, though in reality it was not due to any suspicious conjecture.

"Yes, I think so," said Bulstrode, governing himself and speaking with deliberation. "Mrs. Bulstrode is advised of the reasons which detain me. Mrs. Abel and her husband are not experienced enough to be left quite alone, and this kind of responsibility is scarcely included in their service of me. You have some fresh instructions, I presume."

The chief new instruction that Lydgate had to give was on the administration of extremely moderate doses of opium in case of the sleeplessness continuing after several hours. He had taken the precaution of bringing opium in his pocket, and he gave minute directions to Bulstrode as to the doses and the point at which they should cease. He insisted on the risk of not ceasing and repeated his order that no alcohol should be given.

"From what I see of the case," he ended, "narcotism is the only thing I should be much afraid of. He may wear through even without much food. There's a good deal of strength in him."

"You look ill yourself, Mr. Lydgate—a most unusual, I may say unprecedented thing in my knowledge of you," said Bulstrode, showing a solicitude as unlike his indifference the day before as his present recklessness about his own fatigue was unlike his habitual self-cherishing anxiety. "I fear you are harassed."

"Yes, I am," said Lydgate brusquely, holding his hat and ready to go.

"Something new, I fear," said Bulstrode inquiringly. "Pray be seated."

"No, thank you," said Lydgate with some hauteur. "I mentioned to you yesterday what was the state of my affairs. There is nothing to add except that the execution has since then been actually put into my house. One can tell a good deal of trouble in a short sentence. I will say good-morning."

"Stay, Mr. Lydgate, stay," said Bulstrode; "I have been reconsidering this subject. I was yesterday taken by surprise and saw it superficially. Mrs. Bulstrode is anxious for her niece, and I myself should grieve at a calamitous change in your position. Claims on me are numerous, but on reconsideration, I esteem it right that I should incur a small sacrifice rather than leave you unaided. You said, I think, that a thousand pounds would suffice entirely to free you from your burdens and enable you to recover a firm stand?"

"Yes," said Lydgate, a great leap of joy within him surmounting every other feeling; "that would pay all my debts and leave me a little on hand. I could set about economizing in our way of living. And by and by my practice might look up."

"If you will wait a moment, Mr. Lydgate, I will draw a cheque to that amount. I am aware that help, to be effectual in these cases, should be thorough."

While Bulstrode wrote, Lydgate turned to the window thinking of his home—thinking of his life with its good start saved from frustration, its good purposes still unbroken.

"You can give me a note of hand for this, Mr. Lydgate," said the banker, advancing towards him with the cheque. "And by and by, I hope, you may be in circumstances gradually to repay me. Meanwhile, I have pleasure in thinking that you will be released from further difficulty."

"I am deeply obliged to you," said Lydgate. "You have restored to me the prospect of working with some happiness and some chance of good."

It appeared to him a very natural movement in Bulstrode that he should have reconsidered his refusal: it corresponded with the more munificent side of his character. But as he put his hack into a canter that he might get the sooner home and tell the good news to Rosamond and get cash at the bank to pay over to Dover's agent, there crossed his mind, with an unpleasant impression, as from a dark-winged flight of evil augury across his vision, the thought of that contrast in himself which a few months had brought—that he should be overjoyed at getting money for himself from Bulstrode.

The banker felt that he had done something to nullify one cause of uneasiness, and yet he was scarcely the easier. He did not measure the quantity of diseased motive which had made him wish for Lydgate's goodwill, but the quantity was none the less actively there, like an irritating agent in his blood. A man vows, and yet will not cast away the means of breaking his vow. Is it that he distinctly means to break it? Not at all, but the desires which tend to break it are at work in him dimly and make their way into his imagination and relax his muscles in the very moments when he is telling himself over again the reasons for his vow. Raffles, recovering quickly, returning to the free use of his odious powers—how could Bulstrode wish for that? Raffles dead was the image that brought release, and indirectly he prayed for that way of release, beseeching that, if it were possible, the rest of his days here below might be freed from the threat of an ignominy which would break him utterly as an instrument of God's service. Lydgate's opinion was not on the side of promise that this prayer would be fulfilled; and as the day advanced, Bulstrode felt himself getting irritated at the persistent life in this man, whom he would fain have seen sinking into the silence of death; imperious will stirred murderous impulses towards this brute life, over which will, by itself, had no power. He said inwardly that he was getting too much worn; he would not sit up with the patient tonight, but leave him to Mrs. Abel, who, if necessary, could call her husband.

At six o'clock Raffles, having had only fitful, perturbed snatches of sleep, from which he waked with fresh restlessness and perpetual cries that he was sinking away, Bulstrode began to administer the opium according to Lydgate's directions. At the end of half an hour or more he called Mrs. Abel and told her that he found himself unfit for further watching. He must now consign the patient to her care; and he proceeded to repeat to her Lydgate's directions as to the quantity of each dose. Mrs. Abel had not before known anything of Lydgate's prescriptions; she had simply prepared and brought whatever

Bulstrode ordered and had done what he pointed out to her. She began now to ask what else she should do besides administering the opium.

"Nothing at present, except the offer of the soup or the soda-water; you can come to me for further directions. Unless there is any important change, I shall not come into the room again tonight. You will ask your husband for help if necessary. I must go to bed early."

"You've much need, sir, I'm sure," said Mrs. Abel, "and to take something more strengthening than what you've done."

Bulstrode went away now without anxiety as to what Raffles might say in his raving, which had taken on a muttering incoherence not likely to create any dangerous belief. At any rate he must risk this. He went down into the wainscoted parlour first and began to consider whether he would not have his horse saddled and go home by the moonlight and give up caring for earthly consequences. Then, he wished that he had begged Lydgate to come again that evening. Perhaps he might deliver a different opinion and think that Raffles was getting into a less hopeful state. Should he send for Lydgate? If Raffles were really getting worse and slowly dying, Bulstrode felt that he could go to bed and sleep in gratitude to Providence. But was he worse? Lydgate might come and simply say that he was going on as he expected and predict that he would by and by fall into a good sleep and get well. What was the use of sending for him? Bulstrode shrank from that result. No ideas or opinions could hinder him from seeing the one probability to be, that Raffles recovered would be just the same man as before, with his strength as a tormentor renewed, obliging him to drag away his wife to spend her years apart from her friends and native place, carrying an alienating suspicion against him in her heart.

He had sat an hour and a half in this conflict by the firelight only when a sudden thought made him rise and light the bed-candle, which he had brought down with him. The thought was that he had not told Mrs. Abel when the doses of opium must cease.

He took hold of the candlestick, but stood motionless for a long while. She might already have given him more than Lydgate had prescribed. But it was excusable in him that he should forget part of an order in his present wearied condition. He walked upstairs, candle in hand, not knowing whether he should straightway enter his own room and go to bed or turn to the patient's room and rectify his omission. He paused in the passage, with his face turned towards Raffles's room, and he could hear him moaning and murmuring. He was not asleep, then. Who could know that Lydgate's prescription would not be better disobeyed than followed, since there was still no sleep?

He turned into his own room. Before he had quite undressed, Mrs. Abel rapped at the door; he opened it an inch so that he could hear her speak low.

"If you please, sir, should I have no brandy nor nothing to give the poor creetur? He feels sinking away, and nothing else will he swaller—and but little strength in it, if he did—only the opium. And he says more and more he's sinking down through the earth."

To her surprise, Mr. Bulstrode did not answer. A struggle was going on within him.

"I think he must die for want o' support if he goes on in that way. When I nursed my poor master, Mr. Robisson, I had to give him port-wine and brandy constant, and a big glass at a time," added Mrs. Abel with a touch of remonstrance in her tone.

But again Mr. Bulstrode did not answer immediately, and she continued, "It's not a time to spare when people are at death's door, nor would you wish it, sir, I'm sure. Else I should give him our own bottle o' rum as we keep by us. But a sitter-up so as you've been, and doing everything as laid in your power—"

Here a key was thrust through the inch of doorway, and Mr. Bulstrode said huskily, "That is the key of the wine-cooler. You will find plenty of brandy there."

Early in the morning—about six—Mr. Bulstrode rose and spent some time in prayer. Does anyone suppose that private prayer is necessarily candid—necessarily goes to the roots of action? Private prayer is inaudible speech, and speech is representative; who can represent himself just as he is even in his own reflections? Bulstrode had not yet unravelled in his thought the confused promptings of the last four-and-twenty hours.

He listened in the passage and could hear hard, stertorous breathing. Then he walked out in the garden and looked at the early rime on the grass and fresh spring leaves. When he re-entered the house, he felt startled at the sight of Mrs. Abel.

"How is your patient—asleep, I think?" he said with an attempt at cheerfulness in his tone.

"He's gone very deep, sir," said Mrs. Abel. "He went off gradual between three and four o'clock. Would you please to go and look at him? I thought it no harm to leave him. My man's gone afield, and the little girl's seeing to the kettles."

Bulstrode went up. At a glance he knew that Raffles was not in the sleep which brings revival, but in the sleep which streams deeper and deeper into the gulf of death.

He looked round the room and saw a bottle with some brandy in it and the almost empty opium phial. He put the phial out of sight and carried the brandy-bottle downstairs with him, locking it again in the wine-cooler.

While breakfasting he considered whether he should ride to Middlemarch at once or wait for Lydgate's arrival. He decided to wait and told Mrs. Abel that she might go about her work—he could watch in the bed-chamber.

As he sat there and beheld the enemy of his peace going irrevocably into silence, he felt more at rest than he had done for many months. His conscience was soothed by the enfolding wing of secrecy, which seemed just then like an angel sent down for his relief. He drew out his pocketbook to review various memoranda there as to the arrangements he had projected and partly carried out in the prospect of quitting Middlemarch and considered how far he would let them stand or recall them now that his absence would be brief. Some economies which he felt desirable might still find a suitable occasion in his temporary withdrawal from management, and he hoped still that Mrs. Casaubon would take a large share in the expenses of the hospital. In that way the moments passed, until a change in the stertorous breathing was marked enough to draw his attention wholly to the bed and forced him to think of the departing life, which had once been subservient to his own, which he had once been glad to find base enough for him to act on as he would. It was his gladness then which impelled him now to be glad that the life was at an end.

And who could say that the death of Raffles had been hastened? Who knew what would have saved him?

Lydgate arrived at half-past ten, in time to witness the final pause of the breath. When he entered the room Bulstrode

observed a sudden expression in his face, which was not so much surprise as a recognition that he had not judged correctly. He stood by the bed in silence for some time, with his eyes turned on the dying man but with that subdued activity of expression which showed that he was carrying on an inward debate.

"When did this change begin?" said he, looking at Bulstrode.

"I did not watch by him last night," said Bulstrode. "I was overworn and left him under Mrs. Abel's care. She said that he sank into sleep between three and four o'clock. When I came in before eight he was nearly in this condition."

Lydgate did not ask another question, but watched in silence until he said, "It's all over."

This morning Lydgate was in a state of recovered hope and freedom. He had set out on his work with all his old animation and felt himself strong enough to bear all the deficiencies of his married life. And he was conscious that Bulstrode had been a benefactor to him. But he was uneasy about this case. He had not expected it to terminate as it had done. Yet he hardly knew how to put a question on the subject to Bulstrode without appearing to insult him; and if he examined the housekeeper—why, the man was dead. There seemed to be no use in implying that somebody's ignorance or imprudence had killed him. And after all, he himself might be wrong.

He and Bulstrode rode back to Middlemarch together, talking of many things—chiefly cholera and the chances of the reform bill in the House of Lords and the firm resolve of the political unions. Nothing was said about Raffles, except that Bulstrode mentioned the necessity of having a grave for him in Lowick churchyard and observed that, so far as he knew, the poor man had no connexions except Rigg, whom he had stated to be unfriendly towards him.

On returning home Lydgate had a visit from Mr. Farebrother. The vicar had not been in the town the day before, but the news that there was an execution in Lydgate's house had got to Lowick by the evening, having been carried by Mr. Spicer, shoemaker and parish-clerk, who had it from his brother, the respectable bell-hanger in Lowick Gate. Since that evening when Lydgate had come down from the billiard-room with Fred Vincy, Mr. Farebrother's thoughts about him had been rather gloomy. Playing at the Green Dragon once or oftener might have been a trifle in another man, but in Lydgate it was one of several signs that he was getting unlike his former self. He was beginning to do things for which he had formerly even an excessive scorn. Whatever certain dissatisfactions in marriage, which some silly ticklings of gossip had given him hints of, might have to do with this change, Mr. Farebrother felt sure that it was chiefly connected with the debts which were being more and more distinctly reported, and he began to fear that any notion of Lydgate's having resources or friends in the background must be quite illusory. The rebuff he had met with in his first attempt to win Lydgate's confidence disinclined him to a second, but this news of the execution being actually in the house determined the vicar to overcome his reluctance.

Lydgate had just dismissed a poor patient, in whom he was much interested, and he came forward to put out his hand with an open cheerfulness which surprised Mr. Farebrother. Could this too be a proud rejection of sympathy and help? Never mind; the sympathy and help should be offered.

"How are you, Lydgate? I came to see you because I had heard something which made me anxious about you," said the vicar in the tone of a good brother, only that there was no reproach in it. They were both seated by this time, and Lydgate answered immediately, "I think I know what you mean. You had heard that there was an execution in the house?"

"Yes; is it true?"

"It was true," said Lydgate with an air of freedom, as if he did not mind talking about the affair now. "But the danger is over; the debt is paid. I am out of my difficulties now; I shall be freed from debts and able, I hope, to start afresh on a better plan."

"I am very thankful to hear it," said the vicar, falling back in his chair and speaking with that low-toned quickness which often follows the removal of a load. "I like that better than all the news in the *Times*. I confess I came to you with a heavy heart."

"Thank you for coming," said Lydgate cordially. "I can enjoy the kindness all the more because I am happier. I have certainly been a good deal crushed. I'm afraid I shall find the bruises still painful by and by," he added, smiling rather sadly; "but just now I can only feel that the torture-screw is off."

Mr. Farebrother was silent for a moment, and then said earnestly, "My dear fellow, let me ask you one question. Forgive me if I take a liberty."

"I don't believe you will ask anything that ought to offend me."

"Then—this is necessary to set my heart quite at rest—you have not—have you—in order to pay your debts, incurred another debt which may harass you worse hereafter?"

"No," said Lydgate, colouring slightly. "There is no reason why I should not tell you—since the fact is so—that the person to whom I am indebted is Bulstrode. He has made me a very handsome advance—a thousand pounds—and he can afford to wait for repayment."

"Well, that is generous," said Mr. Farebrother, compelling himself to approve of the man whom he disliked. His delicate feeling shrank from dwelling even in his thought on the fact that he had always urged Lydgate to avoid any personal entanglement with Bulstrode. He added immediately, "And Bulstrode must naturally feel an interest in your welfare after you have worked with him in a way which has probably reduced your income instead of adding to it. I am glad to think that he has acted accordingly."

Lydgate felt uncomfortable under these kindly suppositions. They made more distinct within him the uneasy consciousness which had shown its first dim stirrings only a few hours before, that Bulstrode's motives for his sudden beneficence following close upon the chillest indifference might be merely selfish. He let the kindly suppositions pass. He could not tell the history of the loan, but it was more vividly present with him than ever, as well as the fact which the vicar delicately ignored—that this relation of personal indebtedness to Bulstrode was what he had once been most resolved to avoid.

He began, instead of answering, to speak of his projected economies and of his having come to look at his life from a different point of view.

"I shall set up a surgery," he said. "I really think I made a mistaken effort in that respect. And if Rosamond will not

mind, I shall take an apprentice. I don't like these things, but if one carries them out faithfully they are not really lowering. I have had a severe galling to begin with; that will make the small rubs seem easy."

Poor Lydgate! The "if Rosamond will not mind," which had fallen from him involuntarily as part of his thought, was a significant mark of the yoke he bore. But Mr. Farebrother, whose hopes entered strongly into the same current with Lydgate's and who knew nothing about him that could now raise a melancholy presentiment, left him with affectionate congratulation.

CHAPTER 71

Clown. . . . 'Twas in the Bunch of Grapes, where, indeed, you have a delight to sit, have you not?
Froth. I have so; because it is an open room, and good for winter.
Clo. Why, very well then: I hope here be truths.

—*Measure for Measure*

Five days after the death of Raffles, Mr. Bambridge was standing at his leisure under the large archway leading into the yard of the Green Dragon. He was not fond of solitary contemplation, but he had only just come out of the house, and any human figure standing at ease under the archway in the early afternoon was as certain to attract companionship as a pigeon which has found something worth pecking at. In this case there was no material object to feed upon, but the eye of reason saw a probability of mental sustenance in the shape of gossip. Mr. Hopkins, the meek-mannered draper opposite, was the first to act on this inward vision, being the more ambitious of a little masculine talk because his customers were chiefly women. Mr. Bambridge was rather curt to the draper, feeling that Hopkins was of course glad to talk to *him* but that he was not going to waste much of his talk on Hopkins. Soon, however, there was a small cluster of more important listeners, who were either deposited from the passers-by or had sauntered to the spot expressly to see if there were anything going on at the Green Dragon; and Mr. Bambridge was finding it worth his while to say many impressive things about the fine studs he had been seeing and the purchases he had made on a journey in the North from which he had just returned. Gentlemen present were assured that when they could show him anything to cut out a blood mare, a bay, rising four, which was to be seen at Doncaster if they chose to go and look at it, Mr. Bambridge would gratify them by being shot "from here to Hereford." Also, a pair of blacks which he was going to put into the break recalled vividly to his mind a pair which he had sold to Faulkner in '19 for a hundred guineas and which Faulkner had sold for a hundred and sixty two months later, any gent who could disprove this statement being offered the privilege of calling Mr. Bambridge by a very ugly name until the exercise made his throat dry.

When the discourse was at this point of animation, came up Mr. Frank Hawley. He was not a man to compromise his dignity by lounging at the Green Dragon, but happening to pass along the high street and seeing Bambridge on the other side, he took some of his long strides across to ask the horse-dealer whether he had found the first-rate gig-horse which he had engaged to look for. Mr. Hawley was requested to wait until he had seen a grey selected at Bilkley; if that did not meet his wishes to a hair, Bambridge did not know a horse when he saw it, which seemed to be the highest conceivable unlikelihood. Mr. Hawley, standing with his back to the street, was fixing a time for looking at the grey and seeing it tried when a horseman passed slowly by.

"Bulstrode!" said two or three voices at once in a low tone, one of them, which was the draper's, respectfully prefixing the "Mr.," but nobody having more intention in this interjectional naming than if they had said "the Riverston coach" when that vehicle appeared in the distance. Mr. Hawley gave a careless glance round at Bulstrode's back, but as Bambridge's eyes followed it he made a sarcastic grimace.

"By jingo! That reminds me," he began, lowering his voice a little; "I picked up something else at Bilkley besides your gig-horse, Mr. Hawley. I picked up a fine story about Bulstrode. Do you know how he came by his fortune? Any gentleman wanting a bit of curious information, I can give it him free of expense. If everybody got their deserts, Bulstrode might have had to say his prayers at Botany Bay."

"What do you mean?" said Mr. Hawley, thrusting his hands into his pockets and pushing a little forward under the archway. If Bulstrode should turn out to be a rascal, Frank Hawley had a prophetic soul.

"I had it from a party who was an old chum of Bulstrode's. I'll tell you where I first picked him up," said Bambridge with a sudden gesture of his forefinger. "He was at Larcher's sale, but I knew nothing of him then—he slipped through my fingers—was after Bulstrode, no doubt. He tells me he can tap Bulstrode to any amount, knows all his secrets. However, he blabbed to me at Bilkley; he takes a stiff glass. Damme if I think he meant to turn king's evidence, but he's that sort of bragging fellow, the bragging runs over hedge and ditch with him till he'd brag of a spavin as if it 'ud fetch money. A man should know when to pull up." Mr. Bambridge made this remark with an air of disgust, satisfied that his own bragging showed a fine sense of the marketable.

"What's the man's name? Where can he be found?" said Mr. Hawley.

"As to where he is to be found, I left him to it at the Saracen's Head; but his name is Raffles."

"Raffles!" exclaimed Mr. Hopkins. "I furnished his funeral yesterday. He was buried at Lowick. Mr. Bulstrode followed him. A very decent funeral."

There was a strong sensation among the listeners. Mr. Bambridge gave an ejaculation in which "brimstone" was the mildest word, and Mr. Hawley, knitting his brows and bending his head forward, exclaimed, "What? Where did the man die?"

"At Stone Court," said the draper. "The housekeeper said he was a relation of the master's. He came there ill on Friday."

"Why, it was on Wednesday I took a glass with him," interposed Bambridge.

"Did any doctor attend him?" said Mr. Hawley.

"Yes, Mr. Lydgate. Mr. Bulstrode sat up with him one night. He died the third morning."

“Go on, Bambridge,” said Mr. Hawley insistently. “What did this fellow say about Bulstrode?”

The group had already become larger, the town-clerk’s presence being a guarantee that something worth listening to was going on there; and Mr. Bambridge delivered his narrative in the hearing of seven. It was mainly what we know, including the fact about Will Ladislaw, with some local colour and circumstance added; it was what Bulstrode had dreaded the betrayal of and hoped to have buried forever with the corpse of Raffles; it was that haunting ghost of his earlier life which as he rode past the archway of the Green Dragon he was trusting that Providence had delivered him from. Yes, Providence. He had not confessed to himself yet that he had done anything in the way of contrivance to this end; he had accepted what seemed to have been offered. It was impossible to prove that he had done anything which hastened the departure of that man’s soul.

But this gossip about Bulstrode spread through Middlemarch like the smell of fire. Mr. Frank Hawley followed up his information by sending a clerk whom he could trust to Stone Court on a pretext of inquiring about hay, but really to gather all that could be learned about Raffles and his illness from Mrs. Abel. In this way it came to his knowledge that Mr. Garth had carried the man to Stone Court in his gig; and Mr. Hawley in consequence took an opportunity of seeing Caleb, calling at his office to ask whether he had time to undertake an arbitration if it were required and then asking him incidentally about Raffles. Caleb was betrayed into no word injurious to Bulstrode beyond the fact which he was forced to admit that he had given up acting for him within the last week. Mr. Hawley drew his inferences, and feeling convinced that Raffles had told his story to Garth, and that Garth had given up Bulstrode’s affairs in consequence, said so a few hours later to Mr. Toller. The statement was passed on until it had quite lost the stamp of an inference and was taken as information coming straight from Garth, so that even a diligent historian might have concluded Caleb to be the chief publisher of Bulstrode’s misdemeanours.

Mr. Hawley was not slow to perceive that there was no handle for the law either in the revelations made by Raffles or in the circumstances of his death. He had himself ridden to Lowick village that he might look at the register and talk over the whole matter with Mr. Farebrother, who was not more surprised than the lawyer that an ugly secret should have come to light about Bulstrode, though he had always had justice enough in him to hinder his antipathy from turning into conclusions. But while they were talking, another combination was silently going forward in Mr. Farebrother’s mind, which foreshadowed what was soon to be loudly spoken of in Middlemarch as a necessary “putting of two and two together.” With the reasons which kept Bulstrode in dread of Raffles there flashed the thought that the dread might have something to do with his munificence towards his medical man; and though he resisted the suggestion that it had been consciously accepted in any way as a bribe, he had a foreboding that this complication of things might be of malignant effect on Lydgate’s reputation. He perceived that Mr. Hawley knew nothing at present of the sudden relief from debt, and he himself was careful to glide away from all approaches towards the subject.

“Well,” he said with a deep breath, wanting to wind up the illimitable discussion of what might have been, though nothing could be legally proven, “it is a strange story. So our mercurial Ladislaw has a queer genealogy! A high-spirited young lady and a musical Polish patriot made a likely enough stock for him to spring from, but I should never have suspected a grafting of the Jew pawnbroker. However, there’s no knowing what a mixture will turn out beforehand. Some sorts of dirt serve to clarify.”

“It’s just what I should have expected,” said Mr. Hawley, mounting his horse. “Any cursed alien blood, Jew, Corsican, or Gypsy.”

“I know he’s one of your black sheep, Hawley. But he is really a disinterested, unworldly fellow,” said Mr. Farebrother, smiling.

“Ay, ay, that is your Whiggish twist,” said Mr. Hawley, who had been in the habit of saying apologetically that Farebrother was such a damned pleasant, good-hearted fellow you would mistake him for a Tory.

Mr. Hawley rode home without thinking of Lydgate’s attendance on Raffles in any other light than as a piece of evidence on the side of Bulstrode. But the news that Lydgate had all at once become able not only to get rid of the execution in his house but to pay all his debts in Middlemarch was spreading fast, gathering round it conjectures and comments which gave it new body and impetus and soon filling the ears of other persons besides Mr. Hawley, who were not slow to see a significant relation between this sudden command of money and Bulstrode’s desire to stifle the scandal of Raffles. That the money came from Bulstrode would infallibly have been guessed even if there had been no direct evidence of it, for it had beforehand entered into the gossip about Lydgate’s affairs that neither his father-in-law nor his own family would do anything for him, and direct evidence was furnished not only by a clerk at the bank, but by innocent Mrs. Bulstrode herself, who mentioned the loan to Mrs. Plymdale, who mentioned it to her daughter-in-law of the house of Toller, who mentioned it generally. The business was felt to be so public and important that it required dinners to feed it, and many invitations were just then issued and accepted on the strength of this scandal concerning Bulstrode and Lydgate; wives, widows, and single ladies took their work and went out to tea oftener than usual; and all public conviviality, from the Green Dragon to Dollop’s, gathered a zest which could not be won from the question whether the Lords would throw out the reform bill.

For hardly anybody doubted that some scandalous reason or other was at the bottom of Bulstrode’s liberality to Lydgate. Mr. Hawley, indeed, in the first instance, invited a select party, including the two physicians, with Mr. Toller and Mr. Wrench, expressly to hold a close discussion as to the probabilities of Raffles’s illness, reciting to them all the particulars which had been gathered from Mrs. Abel in connexion with Lydgate’s certificate that the death was due to delirium tremens; and the medical gentlemen, who all stood undisturbedly on the old paths in relation to this disease, declared that they could see nothing in these particulars which could be transformed into a positive ground of suspicion. But the moral grounds of suspicion remained: the strong motives Bulstrode clearly had for wishing to be rid of Raffles and the fact that at this critical moment he had given Lydgate the help which he must for some time have known the need for; the disposition, moreover, to believe that Bulstrode would be unscrupulous, and the absence of any indisposition to believe that Lydgate might be as easily bribed as other haughty-minded men when they have found themselves in want of money. Even if the money had been given merely to make him hold his tongue about the scandal of Bulstrode’s earlier life, the fact threw an odious light on Lydgate, who had long been sneered at as making himself subservient to the banker for the sake of working

himself into predominance and discrediting the elder members of his profession. Hence, in spite of the negative as to any direct sign of guilt in relation to the death at Stone Court, Mr. Hawley's select party broke up with the sense that the affair had "an ugly look."

But this vague conviction of indeterminable guilt, which was enough to keep up much head-shaking and biting innuendo even among substantial professional seniors, had for the general mind all the superior power of mystery over fact. Everybody liked better to conjecture how the thing was than simply to know it, for conjecture soon became more confident than knowledge and had a more liberal allowance for the incompatible. Even the more definite scandal concerning Bulstrode's earlier life was, for some minds, melted into the mass of mystery as so much lively metal to be poured out in dialogue and to take such fantastic shapes as heaven pleased.

This was the tone of thought chiefly sanctioned by Mrs. Dollop, the spirited landlady of the Tankard in Slaughter Lane, who had often to resist the shallow pragmatism of customers disposed to think that their reports from the outer world were of equal force with what had "come up" in her mind. How it had been brought to her she didn't know, but it was there before her as if it had been scored with the chalk on the chimney-board—"as Bulstrode should say, his inside was *that black* as if the hairs of his head knowed the thoughts of his heart, he'd tear 'em up by the roots."

"That's odd," said Mr. Limp, a meditative shoemaker with weak eyes and a piping voice. "Why, I read in the *Trumpet* that was what the Duke of Wellington said when he turned his coat and went over to the Romans."

"Very like," said Mrs. Dollop. "If one raskill said it, it's more reason why another should. But hypo*crite* as he's been, and holding things with that high hand, as there was no parson i' the country good enough for him, he was forced to take Old Harry into his counsel, and Old Harry's been too many for him."

"Ay, ay, he's a 'complice you can't send out o' the country," said Mr. Grabbe, the glazier, who gathered much news and groped among it dimly. "But by what I can make out, there's them says Bulstrode was for running away for fear o' being found out before now."

"He'll be drove away, whether or no," said Mr. Dill, the barber, who had just dropped in. "I shaved Fletcher, Hawley's clerk, this morning—he's got a bad finger—and he says they're all of one mind to get rid o' Bulstrode. Mr. Thesiger is turned against him and wants him out o' the parish. And there's gentlemen in this town says they'd as soon dine with a fellow from the hulks. 'And a deal sooner I would,' says Fletcher; 'for what's more against one's stomach than a man coming and making himself bad company with his religion, and giving out as the Ten Commandments are not enough for him, and all the while he's worse than half the men at the treadmill?' Fletcher said so himself."

"It'll be a bad thing for the town though if Bulstrode's money goes out of it," said Mr. Limp quaveringly.

"Ah, there's better folks spend their money worse," said a firm-voiced dyer, whose crimson hands looked out of keeping with his good-natured face.

"But he won't keep his money, by what I can make out," said the glazier. "Don't they say as there's somebody can strip it off him? By what I can understan', they could take every penny off him if they went to lawing."

"No such thing!" said the barber, who felt himself a little above his company at Dollop's but liked it none the worse. "Fletcher says it's no such thing. He says they might prove over and over again whose child this young Ladislaw was, and they'd do no more than if they proved I came out of the Fens—he couldn't touch a penny."

"Look you there now!" said Mrs. Dollop indignantly. "I thank the Lord he took my children to Himself if that's all the law can do for the motherless. Then by that, it's o' no use who your father and mother is. But as to listening to what one lawyer says without asking another—I wonder at a man o' your cleverness, Mr. Dill. It's well known there's always two sides, if no more; else who'd go to law, I should like to know? It's a poor tale, with all the law as there is up and down, if it's no use proving whose child you are. Fletcher may say that if he likes, but I say, don't Fletcher *me*!"

Mr. Dill affected to laugh in a complimentary way at Mrs. Dollop as a woman who was more than a match for the lawyers, being disposed to submit to much twitting from a landlady who had a long score against him.

"If they come to lawing and it's all true as folks say, there's more to be looked to nor money," said the glazier. "There's this poor creetur as is dead and gone; by what I can make out, he'd seen the day when he was a deal finer gentleman nor Bulstrode."

"Finer gentleman! I'll warrant him," said Mrs. Dollop; "and a far personabler man, by what I can hear. As I said when Mr. Baldwin, the tax-gatherer, comes in, a-standing where you sit, and says, 'Bulstrode got all his money as he brought into this town by thieving and swindling'—I said, 'You don't make me no wiser, Mr. Baldwin; it's set my blood a-creeping to look at him ever sin' here he came into Slaughter Lane a-wanting to buy the house over my head; folks don't look the colour o' the dough-tub and stare at you as if they wanted to see into your backbone for nothingk.' That was what I said, and Mr. Baldwin can bear me witness."

"And in the rights of it too," said Mr. Crabbe. "For by what I can make out, this Raffles, as they call him, was a lusty, fresh-coloured man as you'd wish to see, and the best o' company—though dead he lies in Lowick churchyard sure enough; and by what I can understan' there's them knows more than they *should* know about how he got there."

"I'll believe you!" said Mrs. Dollop with a touch of scorn at Mr. Crabbe's apparent dimness. "When a man's been 'ticed to a lone house, and there's them can pay for hospitals and nurses for half the countryside choose to be sitters-up night and day, and nobody to come near but a doctor as is known to stick at nothingk, and as poor as he can hang together, and after that so flush o' money as he can pay off Mr. Byles the butcher as his bill has been running on for the best o' joints since last Michaelmas was a twelvemonth—I don't want anybody to come and tell me as there's been more going on nor the prayer-book's got a service for—I don't want to stand winking and blinking and thinking."

Mrs. Dollop looked round with the air of a landlady accustomed to dominate her company. There was a chorus of adhesion from the more courageous; but Mr. Limp, after taking a draught, placed his flat hands together and pressed them hard between his knees, looking down at them with blear-eyed contemplation as if the scorching power of Mrs. Dollop's speech had quite dried up and nullified his wits until they could be brought round again by further moisture.

"Why shouldn't they dig the man up and have the crowner?" said the dyer. "It's been done many and many's the time. If there's been foul play they might find it out."

“Not they, Mr. Jonas!” said Mrs. Dollop emphatically. “I know what doctors are. They’re a deal too cunning to be found out. And this Dr. Lydgate that’s been for cutting up everybody before the breath was well out o’ their body—it’s plain enough what use he wanted to make o’ looking into respectable people’s insides. He knows drugs, you may be sure, as you can neither smell nor see, neither before they’re swallowed nor after. Why, I’ve seen drops myself ordered by Doctor Gambit, as is our club doctor and a good charikter, and has brought more live children into the world nor ever another i’ Middlemarch—I say I’ve seen drops myself as made no difference whether they was in the glass or out, and yet have griped you the next day. So I’ll leave your own sense to judge. Don’t tell me! All I say is, it’s a mercy they didn’t take this Doctor Lydgate on to our club. There’s many a mother’s child might ha’ rued it.”

The heads of this discussion at Dollop’s had been the common theme among all classes in the town, had been carried to Lowick parsonage on one side and to Tipton Grange on the other, had come fully to the ears of the Vincy family, and had been discussed with sad reference to “poor Harriet” by all Mrs. Bulstrode’s friends, before Lydgate knew distinctly why people were looking strangely at him, and before Bulstrode himself suspected the betrayal of his secrets. He had not been accustomed to very cordial relations with his neighbours, and hence he could not miss the signs of cordiality; moreover, he had been taking journeys on business of various kinds, having now made up his mind that he need not quit Middlemarch and feeling able consequently to determine on matters which he had before left in suspense.

“We will make a journey to Cheltenham in the course of a month or two,” he had said to his wife. “There are great spiritual advantages to be had in that town along with the air and the waters, and six weeks there will be eminently refreshing to us.”

He really believed in the spiritual advantages and meant that his life henceforth should be the more devoted because of those later sins which he represented to himself as hypothetic, praying hypothetically for their pardon—“if I have herein transgressed.”

As to the hospital, he avoided saying anything further to Lydgate, fearing to manifest a too sudden change of plans immediately on the death of Raffles. In his secret soul he believed that Lydgate suspected his orders to have been intentionally disobeyed, and suspecting this he must also suspect a motive. But nothing had been betrayed to him as to the history of Raffles, and Bulstrode was anxious not to do anything which would give emphasis to his undefined suspicions. As to any certainty that a particular method of treatment would either save or kill, Lydgate himself was constantly arguing against such dogmatism; he had no right to speak, and he had every motive for being silent. Hence Bulstrode felt himself providentially secured. The only incident he had strongly winced under had been an occasional encounter with Caleb Garth, who, however, had raised his hat with mild gravity.

Meanwhile, on the part of the principal townsmen a strong determination was growing against him.

A meeting was to be held in the town-hall on a sanitary question which had risen into pressing importance by the occurrence of a cholera case in the town. Since the Act of Parliament, which had been hurriedly passed, authorizing assessments for sanitary measures, there had been a board for the superintendence of such measures appointed in Middlemarch, and much cleansing and preparation had been concurred in by Whigs and Tories. The question now was whether a piece of ground outside the town should be secured as a burial-ground by means of assessment or by private subscription. The meeting was to be open, and almost everybody of importance in the town was expected to be there.

Mr. Bulstrode was a member of the board, and just before twelve o’clock he started from the bank with the intention of urging the plan of private subscription. Under the hesitation of his projects, he had for some time kept himself in the background, and he felt that he should this morning resume his old position as a man of action and influence in the public affairs of the town where he expected to end his days. Among the various persons going in the same direction, he saw Lydgate; they joined, talked over the object of the meeting, and entered it together.

It seemed that everybody of mark had been earlier than they. But there were still spaces left near the head of the large central table, and they made their way thither. Mr. Farebrother sat opposite, not far from Mr. Hawley; all the medical men were there; Mr. Thesiger was in the chair, and Mr. Brooke of Tipton was on his right hand.

Lydgate noticed a peculiar interchange of glances when he and Bulstrode took their seats.

After the business had been fully opened by the chairman, who pointed out the advantages of purchasing by subscription a piece of ground large enough to be ultimately used as a general cemetery, Mr. Bulstrode, whose rather high-pitched but subdued and fluent voice the town was used to at meetings of this sort, rose and asked leave to deliver his opinion. Lydgate could see again the peculiar interchange of glances before Mr. Hawley started up and said in his firm, resonant voice, “Mr. Chairman, I request that before anyone delivers his opinion on this point I may be permitted to speak on a question of public feeling, which not only by myself, but by many gentlemen present, is regarded as preliminary.”

Mr. Hawley’s mode of speech, even when public decorum repressed his “awful language,” was formidable in its curtness and self-possession. Mr. Thesiger sanctioned the request, Mr. Bulstrode sat down, and Mr. Hawley continued.

“In what I have to say, Mr. Chairman, I am not speaking simply on my own behalf; I am speaking with the concurrence and at the express request of no fewer than eight of my fellow-townsmen who are immediately around us. It is our united sentiment that Mr. Bulstrode should be called upon—and I do now call upon him—to resign public positions which he holds not simply as a taxpayer, but as a gentleman among gentlemen. There are practices and there are acts which, owing to circumstances, the law cannot visit, though they may be worse than many things which are legally punishable. Honest men and gentlemen, if they don’t want the company of people who perpetrate such acts, have got to defend themselves as they best can, and that is what I and the friends whom I may call my clients in this affair are determined to do. I don’t say that Mr. Bulstrode has been guilty of shameful acts, but I call upon him either publicly to deny and confute the scandalous statements made against him by a man now dead, and who died in his house—the statement that he was for many years engaged in nefarious practices and that he won his fortune by dishonest procedures—or else to withdraw from positions which could only have been allowed him as a gentleman among gentlemen.”

All eyes in the room were turned on Mr. Bulstrode, who, since the first mention of his name, had been going through a crisis of feeling almost too violent for his delicate frame to support. Lydgate, who himself was undergoing a shock as from the terrible practical interpretation of some faint augury, felt, nevertheless, that his own movement of resentful hatred was

checked by that instinct of the Healer which thinks first of bringing rescue or relief to the sufferer, when he looked at the shrunken misery of Bulstrode's livid face.

The quick vision that his life was after all a failure, that he was a dishonoured man and must quail before the glance of those towards whom he had habitually assumed the attitude of a reprover—that God had disowned him before men and left him unscreened to the triumphant scorn of those who were glad to have their hatred justified—the sense of utter futility in that equivocation with his conscience in dealing with the life of his accomplice, an equivocation which now turned venomously upon him with the full-grown fang of a discovered lie—all this rushed through him like the agony of terror which fails to kill and leaves the ears still open to the returning wave of execration. The sudden sense of exposure after the re-established sense of safety came, not to the coarse organization of a criminal, but to the susceptible nerve of a man whose intensest being lay in such mastery and predominance as the conditions of his life had shaped for him.

But in that intense being lay the strength of reaction. Through all his bodily infirmity there ran a tenacious nerve of ambitious, self-preserving will, which had continually leaped out like a flame, scattering all doctrinal fears and which, even while he sat an object of compassion for the merciful, was beginning to stir and glow under his ashy paleness. Before the last words were out of Mr. Hawley's mouth, Bulstrode felt that he should answer and that his answer would be a retort. He dared not get up and say, "I am not guilty, the whole story is false." Even if he had dared this, it would have seemed to him, under his present keen sense of betrayal, as vain as to pull, for covering to his nakedness, a frail rag which would rend at every little strain.

For a few moments there was total silence, while every man in the room was looking at Bulstrode. He sat perfectly still, leaning hard against the back of his chair; he could not venture to rise, and when he began to speak he pressed his hands upon the seat on each side of him. But his voice was perfectly audible, though hoarser than usual, and his words were distinctly pronounced, though he paused between each sentence as if short of breath. He said, turning first toward Mr. Thesiger and then looking at Mr. Hawley, "I protest before you, sir, as a Christian minister, against the sanction of proceedings towards me which are dictated by virulent hatred. Those who are hostile to me are glad to believe any libel uttered by a loose tongue against me. And their consciences become strict against me. Say that the evil-speaking of which I am to be made the victim accuses me of malpractices—" here Bulstrode's voice rose and took on a more biting accent, till it seemed a low cry—"who shall be my accuser? Not men whose own lives are unchristian, nay, scandalous—not men who themselves use low instruments to carry out their ends—whose profession is a tissue of chicanery—who have been spending their income on their own sensual enjoyments while I have been devoting mine to advance the best objects with regard to this life and the next."

After the word chicanery there was a growing noise, half of murmurs and half of hisses, while four persons started up at once—Mr. Hawley, Mr. Toller, Mr. Chichely, and Mr. Hackbutt; but Mr. Hawley's outburst was instantaneous and left the others behind in silence.

"If you mean me, sir, I call you and everyone else to the inspection of my professional life. As to Christian or unchristian, I repudiate your canting, palavering Christianity; and as to the way in which I spend my income, it is not my principle to maintain thieves and cheat offspring of their due inheritance in order to support religion and set myself up as a saintly kill-joy. I affect no niceness of conscience; I have not found any nice standards necessary yet to measure your actions by, sir. And I again call upon you to enter into satisfactory explanations concerning the scandals against you or else to withdraw from posts in which we at any rate decline you as a colleague. I say, sir, we decline to cooperate with a man whose character is not cleared from infamous lights cast upon it, not only by reports but by recent actions."

"Allow me, Mr. Hawley," said the chairman; and Mr. Hawley, still fuming, bowed half impatiently and sat down with his hands thrust deep in his pockets.

"Mr. Bulstrode, it is not desirable, I think, to prolong the present discussion," said Mr. Thesiger, turning to the pallid, trembling man; "I must so far concur with what has fallen from Mr. Hawley in expression of a general feeling as to think it due to your Christian profession that you should clear yourself, if possible, from unhappy aspersions. I for my part should be willing to give you full opportunity and hearing. But I must say that your present attitude is painfully inconsistent with those principles which you have sought to identify yourself with and for the honour of which I am bound to care. I recommend you at present, as your clergyman and one who hopes for your reinstatement in respect, to quit the room and avoid further hindrance to business."

Bulstrode, after a moment's hesitation, took his hat from the floor and slowly rose, but he grasped the corner of the chair so totteringly that Lydgate felt sure there was not strength enough in him to walk away without support. What could he do? He could not see a man sink close to him for want of help. He rose and gave his arm to Bulstrode and in that way led him out of the room; yet this act, which might have been one of gentle duty and pure compassion, was at this moment unspeakably bitter to him. It seemed as if he were putting his sign-manual to that association of himself with Bulstrode of which he now saw the full meaning as it must have presented itself to other minds. He now felt the conviction that this man who was leaning tremblingly on his arm had given him the thousand pounds as a bribe and that somehow the treatment of Raffles had been tampered with from an evil motive. The inferences were closely linked enough; the town knew of the loan, believed it to be a bribe, and believed that he took it as a bribe.

Poor Lydgate, his mind struggling under the terrible clutch of this revelation, was all the while morally forced to take Mr. Bulstrode to the bank, send a man off for his carriage, and wait to accompany him home.

Meanwhile the business of the meeting was dispatched and fringed off into eager discussion among various groups concerning this affair of Bulstrode—and Lydgate.

Mr. Brooke, who had before heard only imperfect hints of it, and was very uneasy that he had "gone a little too far" in countenancing Bulstrode, now got himself fully informed and felt some benevolent sadness in talking to Mr. Farebrother about the ugly light in which Lydgate had come to be regarded. Mr. Farebrother was going to walk back to Lowick.

"Step into my carriage," said Mr. Brooke. "I am going round to see Mrs. Casaubon. She was to come back from Yorkshire last night. She will like to see me, you know."

So they drove along, Mr. Brooke chatting with good-natured hope that there had not really been anything black in

Lydgate's behaviour—a young fellow whom he had seen to be quite above the common mark when he brought a letter from his uncle Sir Godwin. Mr. Farebrother said little; he was deeply mournful; with a keen perception of human weakness, he could not be confident that under the pressure of humiliating needs Lydgate had not fallen below himself.

When the carriage drove up to the gate of the manor, Dorothea was out on the gravel and came to greet them.

"Well, my dear," said Mr. Brooke, "we have just come from a meeting—a sanitary meeting, you know."

"Was Mr. Lydgate there?" said Dorothea, who looked full of health and animation and stood with her head bare under the gleaming April lights. "I want to see him and have a great consultation with him about the hospital. I have engaged with Mr. Bulstrode to do so."

"Oh, my dear," said Mr. Brooke, "we have been hearing bad news—bad news, you know."

They walked through the garden towards the churchyard gate, Mr. Farebrother wanting to go on to the parsonage; and Dorothea heard the whole sad story.

She listened with deep interest and begged to hear twice over the facts and impressions concerning Lydgate. After a short silence, pausing at the churchyard gate and addressing Mr. Farebrother, she said energetically, "You don't believe that Mr. Lydgate is guilty of anything base? I will not believe it. Let us find out the truth and clear him!"

BOOK VIII

SUNSET AND SUNRISE

CHAPTER 72

Full souls are double mirrors, making still
An endless vista of fair things before,
Repeating things behind.

Dorothea's impetuous generosity, which would have leaped at once to the vindication of Lydgate from the suspicion of having accepted money as a bribe, underwent a melancholy check when she came to consider all the circumstances of the case by the light of Mr. Farebrother's experience.

"It is a delicate matter to touch," he said. "How can we begin to inquire into it? It must be either publicly by setting the magistrate and coroner to work or privately by questioning Lydgate. As to the first proceeding, there is no solid ground to go upon, else Hawley would have adopted it; and as to opening the subject with Lydgate, I confess I should shrink from it. He would probably take it as a deadly insult. I have more than once experienced the difficulty of speaking to him on personal matters. And—one should know the truth about his conduct beforehand to feel very confident of a good result."

"I feel convinced that his conduct has not been guilty; I believe that people are almost always better than their neighbours think they are," said Dorothea. Some of her intensest experience in the last two years had set her mind strongly in opposition to any unfavourable construction of others, and for the first time she felt rather discontented with Mr. Farebrother. She disliked this cautious weighing of consequences instead of an ardent faith in efforts of justice and mercy, which would conquer by their emotional force. Two days afterwards he was dining at the manor with her uncle and the Chettams, and when the dessert was standing uneaten, the servants were out of the room, and Mr. Brooke was nodding in a nap, she returned to the subject with renewed vivacity.

"Mr. Lydgate would understand that if his friends hear a calumny about him their first wish must be to justify him. What do we live for if it is not to make life less difficult to each other? I cannot be indifferent to the troubles of a man who advised me in *my* trouble and attended me in my illness."

Dorothea's tone and manner were not more energetic than they had been when she was at the head of her uncle's table nearly three years before, and her experience since had given her more right to express a decided opinion. But Sir James Chettam was no longer the diffident and acquiescent suitor; he was the anxious brother-in-law, with a devout admiration for his sister, but with a constant alarm lest she should fall under some new illusion almost as bad as marrying Casaubon. He smiled much less; when he said "Exactly" it was more often an introduction to a dissentient opinion than in those submissive bachelor days; and Dorothea found to her surprise that she had to resolve not to be afraid of him—all the more because he was really her best friend. He disagreed with her now.

"But, Dorothea," he said remonstrantly, "you can't undertake to manage a man's life for him in that way. Lydgate must know—at least he will soon come to know—how he stands. If he can clear himself, he will. He must act for himself."

"I think his friends must wait till they find an opportunity," added Mr. Farebrother. "It is possible—I have often felt so much weakness in myself that I can conceive even a man of honourable disposition, such as I have always believed Lydgate to be, succumbing to such a temptation as that of accepting money which was offered more or less indirectly as a bribe to insure his silence about scandalous facts long gone by. I say, I can conceive this, if he were under the pressure of hard circumstances—if he had been harassed as I feel sure Lydgate has been. I would not believe anything worse of him except under stringent proof. But there is the terrible nemesis following on some errors that it is always possible for those who like it to interpret them into a crime; there is no proof in favour of the man outside his own consciousness and assertion."

"Oh, how cruel!" said Dorothea, clasping her hands. "And would you not like to be the one person who believed in that man's innocence if the rest of the world belied him? Besides, there is a man's character beforehand to speak for him."

"But, my dear Mrs. Casaubon," said Mr. Farebrother, smiling gently at her ardour, "character is not cut in marble; it is not something solid and unalterable. It is something living and changing, and may become diseased as our bodies do."

"Then it may be rescued and healed," said Dorothea. "I should not be afraid of asking Mr. Lydgate to tell me the truth that I might help him. Why should I be afraid? Now that I am not to have the land, James, I might do as Mr. Bulstrode proposed and take his place in providing for the hospital; and I have to consult Mr. Lydgate to know thoroughly what are the prospects of doing good by keeping up the present plans. There is the best opportunity in the world for me to ask for his confidence; and he would be able to tell me things which might make all the circumstances clear. Then we would all stand by him and bring him out of his trouble. People glorify all sorts of bravery except the bravery they might show on behalf of their nearest neighbours." Dorothea's eyes had a moist brightness in them, and the changed tones of her voice roused her uncle, who began to listen.

"It is true that a woman may venture on some efforts of sympathy which would hardly succeed if we men undertook them," said Mr. Farebrother, almost converted by Dorothea's ardour.

"Surely, a woman is bound to be cautious and listen to those who know the world better than she does," said Sir James with his little frown. "Whatever you do in the end, Dorothea, you should really keep back at present and not volunteer any meddling with this Bulstrode business. We don't know yet what may turn up. You must agree with me?" he ended, looking at Mr. Farebrother.

“I do think it would be better to wait,” said the latter.

“Yes, yes, my dear,” said Mr. Brooke, not quite knowing at what point the discussion had arrived, but coming up to it with a contribution which was generally appropriate. “It is easy to go too far, you know. You must not let your ideas run away with you. And as to being in a hurry to put money into schemes—it won’t do, you know. Garth has drawn me in uncommonly with repairs, draining, that sort of thing; I’m uncommonly out of pocket with one thing or another. I must pull up. As for you, Chettam, you are spending a fortune on those oak fences round your demesne.”

Dorothea, submitting uneasily to this discouragement, went with Celia into the library, which was her usual drawing-room.

“Now, Dodo, do listen to what James says,” said Celia, “else you will be getting into a scrape. You always did, and you always will, when you set about doing as you please. And I think it is a mercy now after all that you have got James to think for you. He lets you have your plans, only he hinders you from being taken in. And that is the good of having a brother instead of a husband. A husband would not let you have your plans.”

“As if I wanted a husband!” said Dorothea. “I only want not to have my feelings checked at every turn.” Mrs. Casaubon was still undisciplined enough to burst into angry tears.

“Now, really, Dodo,” said Celia with rather a deeper guttural than usual, “you *are* contradictory: first one thing and then another. You used to submit to Mr. Casaubon quite shamefully; I think you would have given up ever coming to see me if he had asked you.”

“Of course I submitted to him because it was my duty; it was my feeling for him,” said Dorothea, looking through the prism of her tears.

“Then why can’t you think it your duty to submit a little to what James wishes?” said Celia with a sense of stringency in her argument. “Because he only wishes what is for your own good. And, of course men know best about everything, except what women know better.”

Dorothea laughed and forgot her tears.

“Well, I mean about babies and those things,” explained Celia. “I should not give up to James when I knew he was wrong, as you used to do to Mr. Casaubon.”

CHAPTER 73

Pity the laden one; this wandering woe
May visit you and me.

When Lydgate had allayed Mrs. Bulstrode's anxiety by telling her that her husband had been seized with faintness at the meeting, but that he trusted soon to see him better and would call again the next day unless she sent for him earlier, he went directly home, got on his horse, and rode three miles out of the town for the sake of being out of reach.

He felt himself becoming violent and unreasonable as if raging under the pain of stings; he was ready to curse the day on which he had come to Middlemarch. Everything that had happened to him there seemed a mere preparation for this hateful fatality, which had come as a blight on his honourable ambition and must make even people who had only vulgar standards regard his reputation as irrevocably damaged. In such moments a man can hardly escape being unloving. Lydgate thought of himself as the sufferer and of others as the agents who had injured his lot. He had meant everything to turn out differently, and others had thrust themselves into his life and thwarted his purposes. His marriage seemed an unmitigated calamity, and he was afraid of going to Rosamond before he had vented himself in this solitary rage, lest the mere sight of her should exasperate him and make him behave unwarrantably. There are episodes in most men's lives in which their highest qualities can only cast a deterring shadow over the objects that fill their inward vision; Lydgate's tender-heartedness was present just then only as a dread lest he should offend against it, not as an emotion that swayed him to tenderness. For he was very miserable. Only those who know the supremacy of the intellectual life—the life which has a seed of ennobling thought and purpose within it—can understand the grief of one who falls from that serene activity into the absorbing, soul-wasting struggle with worldly annoyances.

How was he to live on without vindicating himself among people who suspected him of baseness? How could he go silently away from Middlemarch as if he were retreating before a just condemnation? And yet how was he to set about vindicating himself?

For that scene at the meeting, which he had just witnessed, although it had told him no particulars, had been enough to make his own situation thoroughly clear to him. Bulstrode had been in dread of scandalous disclosures on the part of Raffles. Lydgate could now construct all the probabilities of the case. "He was afraid of some betrayal in my hearing: all he wanted was to bind me to him by a strong obligation; that is why he passed on a sudden from hardness to liberality. And he may have tampered with the patient—he may have disobeyed my orders. I fear he did. But whether he did or not, the world believes that he somehow or other poisoned the man and that I winked at the crime if I didn't help in it. And yet—and yet he may not be guilty of the last offence; and it is just possible that the change towards me may have been a genuine relenting—the effect of second thoughts such as he alleged. What we call the 'just possible' is sometimes true and the thing we find it easier to believe is grossly false. In his last dealings with this man, Bulstrode may have kept his hands pure in spite of my suspicion to the contrary."

There was a benumbing cruelty in his position. Even if he renounced every other consideration than that of justifying himself—if he met shrugs, cold glances, and avoidance as an accusation and made a public statement of all the facts as he knew them, who would be convinced? It would be playing the part of a fool to offer his own testimony on behalf of himself and say, "I did not take the money as a bribe." The circumstances would always be stronger than his assertion. And besides, to come forward and tell everything about himself must include declarations about Bulstrode which would darken the suspicions of others against him. He must tell that he had not known of Raffles's existence when he first mentioned his pressing need of money to Bulstrode and that he took the money innocently as a result of that communication, not knowing that a new motive for the loan might have arisen on his being called in to this man. And after all, the suspicion of Bulstrode's motives might be unjust.

But then came the question whether he should have acted in precisely the same way if he had not taken the money? Certainly, if Raffles had continued alive and susceptible of further treatment when he arrived, and he had then imagined any disobedience to his orders on the part of Bulstrode, he would have made a strict inquiry, and if his conjecture had been verified he would have thrown up the case in spite of his recent heavy obligation. But if he had not received any money, if Bulstrode had never revoked his cold recommendation of bankruptcy, would he, Lydgate, have abstained from all inquiry even on finding the man dead? Would the shrinking from an insult to Bulstrode, would the dubiousness of all medical treatment and the argument that his own treatment would pass for the wrong with most members of his profession, have had just the same force or significance with him?

That was the uneasy corner of Lydgate's consciousness while he was reviewing the facts and resisting all reproach. If he had been independent, this matter of a patient's treatment and the distinct rule that he must do or see done that which he believed best for the life committed to him would have been the point on which he would have been the sturdiest. As it was, he had rested in the consideration that disobedience to his orders, however it might have arisen, could not be considered a crime, that in the dominant opinion obedience to his orders was just as likely to be fatal, and that the affair was simply one of etiquette. Whereas, again and again in his time of freedom he had denounced the perversion of pathological doubt into moral doubt and had said, "The purest experiment in treatment may still be conscientious; my

business is to take care of life and to do the best I can think of for it. Science is properly more scrupulous than dogma. Dogma gives a charter to mistake, but the very breath of science is a contest with mistake and must keep the conscience alive." Alas! The scientific conscience had got into the debasing company of money obligation and selfish respects.

"Is there a medical man of them all in Middlemarch who would question himself as I do?" said poor Lydgate with a renewed outburst of rebellion against the oppression of his lot. "And yet they will all feel warranted in making a wide space between me and them as if I were a leper! My practice and my reputation are utterly damned—I can see that. Even if I could be cleared by valid evidence, it would make little difference to the blessed world here. I have been set down as tainted and should be cheapened to them all the same."

Already there had been abundant signs which had hitherto puzzled him, that just when he had been paying off his debts and getting cheerfully on his feet the townsmen were avoiding him or looking strangely at him, and in two instances it came to his knowledge that patients of his had called in another practitioner. The reasons were too plain now. The general black-balling had begun.

No wonder that in Lydgate's energetic nature the sense of a hopeless misconstruction easily turned into a dogged resistance. The scowl which occasionally showed itself on his square brow was not a meaningless accident. Already when he was re-entering the town after that ride taken in the first hours of stinging pain, he was setting his mind on remaining in Middlemarch in spite of the worst that could be done against him. He would not retreat before calumny as if he submitted to it. He would face it to the utmost, and no act of his should show that he was afraid. It belonged to the generosity as well as defiant force of his nature that he resolved not to shrink from showing to the full his sense of obligation to Bulstrode. It was true that the association with this man had been fatal to him, true that if he had had the thousand pounds still in his hands with all his debts unpaid he would have returned the money to Bulstrode and taken beggary rather than the rescue which had been sullied with the suspicion of a bribe (for, remember, he was one of the proudest among the sons of men)—nevertheless, he would not turn away from this crushed fellow-mortal whose aid he had used and make a pitiful effort to get acquittal for himself by howling against another. "I shall do as I think right, and explain to nobody. They will try to starve me out, but—" he was going on with an obstinate resolve, but he was getting near home, and the thought of Rosamond urged itself again into that chief place from which it had been thrust by the agonized struggles of wounded honour and pride.

How would Rosamond take it all? Here was another weight of chain to drag, and poor Lydgate was in a bad mood for bearing her dumb mastery. He had no impulse to tell her the trouble which must soon be common to them both. He preferred waiting for the incidental disclosure which events must soon bring about.

CHAPTER 74

Mercifully grant that we may grow aged together.

—BOOK OF TOBIT: *Marriage Prayer*

In Middlemarch a wife could not long remain ignorant that the town held a bad opinion of her husband. No feminine intimate might carry her friendship so far as to make a plain statement to the wife of the unpleasant fact known or believed about her husband, but when a woman with her thoughts much at leisure got them suddenly employed on something grievously disadvantageous to her neighbours, various moral impulses were called into play which tended to stimulate utterance. Candour was one. To be candid, in Middlemarch phraseology, meant to use an early opportunity of letting your friends know that you did not take a cheerful view of their capacity, their conduct, or their position; and a robust candour never waited to be asked for its opinion. Then, again, there was the love of truth—a wide phrase, but meaning in this relation a lively objection to seeing a wife look happier than her husband's character warranted or manifest too much satisfaction in her lot: the poor thing should have some hint given her that if she knew the truth she would have less complacency in her bonnet and in light dishes for a supper-party. Stronger than all, there was the regard for a friend's moral improvement, sometimes called her soul, which was likely to be benefited by remarks tending to gloom, uttered with the accompaniment of pensive staring at the furniture and a manner implying that the speaker would not tell what was on her mind from regard to the feelings of her hearer. On the whole, one might say that an ardent charity was at work setting the virtuous mind to make a neighbour unhappy for her good.

There were hardly any wives in Middlemarch whose matrimonial misfortunes would in different ways be likely to call forth more of this moral activity than Rosamond and her aunt Bulstrode. Mrs. Bulstrode was not an object of dislike and had never consciously injured any human being. Men had always thought her a handsome, comfortable woman and had reckoned it among the signs of Bulstrode's hypocrisy that he had chosen a red-blooded Vincy instead of a ghastly and melancholy person suited to his low esteem for earthly pleasure. When the scandal about her husband was disclosed they remarked of her, "Ah, poor woman! She's as honest as the day—*she* never suspected anything wrong in him, you may depend on it." Women who were intimate with her talked together much of "poor Harriet," imagined what her feelings must be when she came to know everything, and conjectured how much she had already come to know. There was no spiteful disposition towards her; rather, there was a busy benevolence anxious to ascertain what it would be well for her to feel and do under the circumstances, which of course kept the imagination occupied with her character and history from the times when she was Harriet Vincy till now. With the review of Mrs. Bulstrode and her position it was inevitable to associate Rosamond, whose prospects were under the same blight with her aunt's. Rosamond was more severely criticised and less pitied, though she too, as one of the good old Vincy family who had always been known in Middlemarch, was regarded as a victim to marriage with an interloper. The Vincys had their weaknesses, but then they lay on the surface; there was never anything bad to be "found out" concerning them. Mrs. Bulstrode was vindicated from any resemblance to her husband. Harriet's faults were her own.

"She has always been showy," said Mrs. Hackbutt, making tea for a small party, "though she has got into the way of putting her religion forward to conform to her husband; she has tried to hold her head up above Middlemarch by making it known that she invites clergymen and heaven-knows-who from Riverston and those places."

"We can hardly blame her for that," said Mrs. Sprague, "because few of the best people in the town cared to associate with Bulstrode, and she must have somebody to sit down at her table."

"Mr. Thesiger has always countenanced him," said Mrs. Hackbutt. "I think he must be sorry now."

"But he was never fond of him in his heart—that everyone knows," said Mrs. Tom Toller. "Mr. Thesiger never goes into extremes. He keeps to the truth in what is evangelical. It is only clergymen like Mr. Tyke, who want to use dissenting hymnbooks and that low kind of religion, who ever found Bulstrode to their taste."

"I understand Mr. Tyke is in great distress about him," said Mrs. Hackbutt. "And well he may be; they say the Bulstrodes have half kept the Tyke family."

"And of course it is a discredit to his doctrines," said Mrs. Sprague, who was elderly and old-fashioned in her opinions. "People will not make a boast of being methodistical in Middlemarch for a good while to come."

"I think we must not set down people's bad actions to their religion," said falcon-faced Mrs. Plymdale, who had been listening hitherto.

"Oh, my dear, we are forgetting," said Mrs. Sprague. "We ought not to be talking of this before you."

"I am sure I have no reason to be partial," said Mrs. Plymdale, colouring. "It's true Mr. Plymdale has always been on good terms with Mr. Bulstrode, and Harriet Vincy was my friend long before she married him. But I have always kept my own opinions and told her where she was wrong, poor thing. Still, in point of religion, I must say, Mr. Bulstrode might have done what he has, and worse, and yet have been a man of no religion. I don't say that there has not been a little too much of that—I like moderation myself. But truth is truth. The men tried at the assizes are not all over-religious, I suppose."

"Well," said Mrs. Hackbutt, wheeling adroitly, "all I can say is that I think she ought to separate from him."

"I can't say that," said Mrs. Sprague. "She took him for better or worse, you know."

"But 'worse' can never mean finding out that your husband is fit for Newgate," said Mrs. Hackbutt. "Fancy living with such a man! I should expect to be poisoned."

"Yes, I think myself it is an encouragement to crime if such men are to be taken care of and waited on by good wives," said Mrs. Tom Toller.

"And a good wife poor Harriet has been," said Mrs. Plymdale. "She thinks her husband the first of men. It's true he has never denied her anything."

"Well, we shall see what she will do," said Mrs. Hackbutt. "I suppose she knows nothing yet, poor creature. I do hope and trust I shall not see her, for I should be frightened to death lest I should say anything about her husband. Do you think any hint has reached her?"

"I should hardly think so," said Mrs. Tom Toller. "We hear that *he* is ill and has never stirred out of the house since the meeting on Thursday; but she was with her girls at church yesterday, and they had new Tuscan bonnets. Her own had a feather in it. I have never seen that her religion made any difference in her dress."

"She wears very neat patterns always," said Mrs. Plymdale, a little stung. "And that feather I know she got dyed a pale lavender on purpose to be consistent. I must say it of Harriet that she wishes to do right."

"As to her knowing what has happened, it can't be kept from her long," said Mrs. Hackbutt. "The Vincys know, for Mr. Vincy was at the meeting. It will be a great blow to him. There is his daughter as well as his sister."

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Sprague. "Nobody supposes that Mr. Lydgate can go on holding up his head in Middlemarch, things look so black about the thousand pounds he took just at that man's death. It really makes one shudder."

"Pride must have a fall," said Mrs. Hackbutt.

"I am not so sorry for Rosamond Vincy that was as I am for her aunt," said Mrs. Plymdale. "She needed a lesson."

"I suppose the Bulstrodes will go and live abroad somewhere," said Mrs. Sprague. "That is what is generally done when there is anything disgraceful in a family."

"And a most deadly blow it will be to Harriet," said Mrs. Plymdale. "If ever a woman was crushed, she will be. I pity her from my heart. And with all her faults, few women are better. From a girl she had the neatest ways and was always good-hearted and as open as the day. You might look into her drawers when you would—always the same. And so she has brought up Kate and Ellen. You may think how hard it will be for her to go among foreigners."

"The doctor says that is what he should recommend the Lydgates to do," said Mrs. Sprague. "He says Lydgate ought to have kept among the French."

"That would suit *her* well enough, I dare say," said Mrs. Plymdale; "there is that kind of lightness about her. But she got that from her mother; she never got it from her aunt Bulstrode, who always gave her good advice and to my knowledge would rather have had her marry elsewhere."

Mrs. Plymdale was in a situation which caused her some complication of feeling. There had been not only her intimacy with Mrs. Bulstrode, but also a profitable business relation of the great Plymdale dyeing house with Mr. Bulstrode, which on the one hand would have inclined her to desire that the mildest view of his character should be the true one, but on the other made her the more afraid of seeming to palliate his culpability. Again, the late alliance of her family with the Tollers had brought her in connexion with the best circle, which gratified her in every direction except in the inclination to those serious views which she believed to be the best in another sense. The sharp little woman's conscience was somewhat troubled in the adjustment of these opposing "bests" and of her griefs and satisfactions under late events, which were likely to humble those who needed humbling but also to fall heavily on her old friend whose faults she would have preferred seeing on a background of prosperity.

Poor Mrs. Bulstrode, meanwhile, had been no further shaken by the oncoming tread of calamity than in the busier stirring of that secret uneasiness which had always been present in her since the last visit of Raffles to the Shrubs. That the hateful man had come ill to Stone Court and that her husband had chosen to remain there and watch over him she allowed to be explained by the fact that Raffles had been employed and aided in earlier days and that this made a tie of benevolence towards him in his degraded helplessness; and she had been since then innocently cheered by her husband's more hopeful speech about his own health and ability to continue his attention to business. The calm was disturbed when Lydgate had brought him home ill from the meeting, and in spite of comforting assurances during the next few days, she cried in private from the conviction that her husband was not suffering from bodily illness merely, but from something that afflicted his mind. He would not allow her to read to him, and scarcely to sit with him, alleging nervous susceptibility to sounds and movements; yet she suspected that in shutting himself up in his private room he wanted to be busy with his papers. Something, she felt sure, had happened. Perhaps it was some great loss of money, and she was kept in the dark. Not daring to question her husband, she said to Lydgate on the fifth day after the meeting, when she had not left home except to go to church, "Mr. Lydgate, pray be open with me; I like to know the truth. Has anything happened to Mr. Bulstrode?"

"Some little nervous shock," said Lydgate evasively. He felt that it was not for him to make the painful revelation.

"But what brought it on?" said Mrs. Bulstrode, looking directly at him with her large, dark eyes.

"There is often something poisonous in the air of public rooms," said Lydgate. "Strong men can stand it, but it tells on people in proportion to the delicacy of their systems. It is often impossible to account for the precise moment of an attack—or rather, to say why the strength gives way at a particular moment."

Mrs. Bulstrode was not satisfied with this answer. There remained in her the belief that some calamity had befallen her husband, of which she was to be kept in ignorance; and it was in her nature strongly to object to such concealment. She begged leave for her daughters to sit with their father and drove into the town to pay some visits, conjecturing that if anything were known to have gone wrong in Mr. Bulstrode's affairs, she should see or hear some sign of it.

She called on Mrs. Thesiger, who was not at home, and then drove to Mrs. Hackbutt's on the other side of the churchyard. Mrs. Hackbutt saw her coming from an upstairs window, and remembering her former alarm lest she should meet Mrs. Bulstrode, felt almost bound in consistency to send word that she was not at home; but against that, there was a sudden strong desire within her for the excitement of an interview in which she was quite determined not to make the

slightest allusion to what was in her mind.

Hence Mrs. Bulstrode was shown into the drawing-room, and Mrs. Hackbutt went to her with more tightness of lip and rubbing of her hands than was usually observable in her, these being precautions adopted against freedom of speech. She was resolved not to ask how Mr. Bulstrode was.

"I have not been anywhere except to church for nearly a week," said Mrs. Bulstrode after a few introductory remarks. "But Mr. Bulstrode was taken so ill at the meeting on Thursday that I have not liked to leave the house."

Mrs. Hackbutt rubbed the back of one hand with the palm of the other held against her chest and let her eyes ramble over the pattern on the rug.

"Was Mr. Hackbutt at the meeting?" persevered Mrs. Bulstrode.

"Yes, he was," said Mrs. Hackbutt with the same attitude. "The land is to be bought by subscription, I believe."

"Let us hope that there will be no more cases of cholera to be buried in it," said Mrs. Bulstrode. "It is an awful visitation. But I always think Middlemarch a very healthy spot. I suppose it is being used to it from a child; but I never saw the town I should like to live at better, and especially our end."

"I am sure I should be glad that you always should live at Middlemarch, Mrs. Bulstrode," said Mrs. Hackbutt with a slight sigh. "Still, we must learn to resign ourselves wherever our lot may be cast. Though I am sure there will always be people in this town who will wish you well."

Mrs. Hackbutt longed to say, "If you take my advice you will part from your husband," but it seemed clear to her that the poor woman knew nothing of the thunder ready to bolt on her head, and she herself could do no more than prepare her a little. Mrs. Bulstrode felt suddenly rather chill and trembling; there was evidently something unusual behind this speech of Mrs. Hackbutt's; but though she had set out with the desire to be fully informed, she found herself unable now to pursue her brave purpose, and turning the conversation by an inquiry about the young Hackbutts, she soon took her leave saying that she was going to see Mrs. Plymdale. On her way thither she tried to imagine that there might have been some unusually warm sparring at the meeting between Mr. Bulstrode and some of his frequent opponents—perhaps Mr. Hackbutt might have been one of them. That would account for everything.

But when she was in conversation with Mrs. Plymdale that comforting explanation seemed no longer tenable. "Selina" received her with a pathetic affectionateness and a disposition to give edifying answers on the commonest topics, which could hardly have reference to an ordinary quarrel of which the most important consequence was a perturbation of Mr. Bulstrode's health. Beforehand Mrs. Bulstrode had thought that she would sooner question Mrs. Plymdale than anyone else, but she found to her surprise that an old friend is not always the person whom it is easiest to make a confidant of: there was the barrier of remembered communication under other circumstances—there was the dislike of being pitied and informed by one who had been long wont to allow her the superiority. For certain words of mysterious appropriateness that Mrs. Plymdale let fall about her resolution never to turn her back on her friends convinced Mrs. Bulstrode that what had happened must be some kind of misfortune, and instead of being able to say with her native directness, "What is it that you have in your mind?" she found herself anxious to get away before she had heard anything more explicit. She began to have an agitating certainty that the misfortune was something more than the mere loss of money, being keenly sensitive to the fact that Selina now, just as Mrs. Hackbutt had done before, avoided noticing what she said about her husband as they would have avoided noticing a personal blemish.

She said good-bye with nervous haste and told the coachman to drive to Mr. Vincy's warehouse. In that short drive her dread gathered so much force from the sense of darkness that when she entered the private counting-house where her brother sat at his desk, her knees trembled and her usually florid face was deathly pale. Something of the same effect was produced in him by the sight of her; he rose from his seat to meet her, took her by the hand, and said with his impulsive rashness, "God help you, Harriet! You know all."

That moment was perhaps worse than any which came after. It contained that concentrated experience which in great crises of emotion reveals the bias of a nature and is prophetic of the ultimate act which will end an intermediate struggle. Without that memory of Raffles she might still have thought only of monetary ruin, but now along with her brother's look and words there darted into her mind the idea of some guilt in her husband; then, under the working of terror came the image of her husband exposed to disgrace; and then, after an instant of scorching shame in which she felt only the eyes of the world, with one leap of her heart she was at his side in mournful but unreproaching fellowship with shame and isolation. All this went on within her in a mere flash of time, while she sank into the chair and raised her eyes to her brother, who stood over her. "I know nothing, Walter. What is it?" she said faintly.

He told her everything, very inartificially, in slow fragments, making her aware that the scandal went much beyond proof, especially as to the end of Raffles.

"People will talk," he said. "Even if a man has been acquitted by a jury, they'll talk and nod and wink—and as far as the world goes, a man might often as well be guilty as not. It's a breakdown blow, and it damages Lydgate as much as Bulstrode. I don't pretend to say what is the truth. I only wish we had never heard the name of either Bulstrode or Lydgate. You'd better have been a Vincy all your life, and so had Rosamond."

Mrs. Bulstrode made no reply.

"But you must bear up as well as you can, Harriet. People don't blame *you*. And I'll stand by you whatever you make up your mind to do," said the brother with rough but well-meaning affectionateness.

"Give me your arm to the carriage, Walter," said Mrs. Bulstrode. "I feel very weak."

And when she got home she was obliged to say to her daughter, "I am not well, my dear; I must go and lie down. Attend to your papa. Leave me in quiet. I shall take no dinner."

She locked herself in her room. She needed time to get used to her maimed consciousness, her poor lopped life, before she could walk steadily to the place allotted her. A new searching light had fallen on her husband's character, and she could not judge him leniently; the twenty years in which she had believed in him and venerated him by virtue of his concealments came back with particulars that made them seem an odious deceit. He had married her with that bad past life hidden behind him and she had no faith left to protest his innocence of the worst that was imputed to him. Her honest,

ostentatious nature made the sharing of a merited dishonour as bitter as it could be to any mortal.

But this imperfectly taught woman, whose phrases and habits were an odd patchwork, had a loyal spirit within her. The man whose prosperity she had shared through nearly half a life and who had unvaryingly cherished her—now that punishment had befallen him it was not possible to her in any sense to forsake him. There is a forsaking which still sits at the same board and lies on the same couch with the forsaken soul, withering it the more by unloving proximity. She knew, when she locked her door, that she should unlock it ready to go down to her unhappy husband and espouse his sorrow and say of his guilt, I will mourn and not reproach. But she needed time to gather up her strength; she needed to sob out her farewell to all the gladness and pride of her life. When she had resolved to go down, she prepared herself by some little acts which might seem mere folly to a hard onlooker; they were her way of expressing to all spectators visible or invisible that she had begun a new life in which she embraced humiliation. She took off all her ornaments and put on a plain black gown, and instead of wearing her much-adorned cap and large bows of hair, she brushed her hair down and put on a plain bonnet-cap, which made her look suddenly like an early Methodist.

Bulstrode, who knew that his wife had been out and had come in saying that she was not well, had spent the time in an agitation equal to hers. He had looked forward to her learning the truth from others and had acquiesced in that probability as something easier to him than any confession. But now that he imagined the moment of her knowledge come, he awaited the result in anguish. His daughters had been obliged to consent to leave him, and though he had allowed some food to be brought to him, he had not touched it. He felt himself perishing slowly in unpitied misery. Perhaps he should never see his wife's face with affection in it again. And if he turned to God there seemed to be no answer but the pressure of retribution.

It was eight o'clock in the evening before the door opened and his wife entered. He dared not look up at her. He sat with his eyes bent down, and as she went towards him she thought he looked smaller—he seemed so withered and shrunken. A movement of new compassion and old tenderness went through her like a great wave, and putting one hand on his which rested on the arm of the chair, and the other on his shoulder, she said solemnly but kindly, "Look up, Nicholas."

He raised his eyes with a little start and looked at her half amazed for a moment: her pale face, her changed, mourning dress, the trembling about her mouth, all said, "I know"; and her hands and eyes rested gently on him. He burst out crying and they cried together, she sitting at his side. They could not yet speak to each other of the shame which she was bearing with him or of the acts which had brought it down on them. His confession was silent, and her promise of faithfulness was silent. Open-minded as she was, she nevertheless shrank from the words which would have expressed their mutual consciousness as she would have shrunk from flakes of fire. She could not say, "How much is only slander and false suspicion?" And he did not say, "I am innocent."

CHAPTER 75

Le sentiment de la fausseté des plaisirs présents, et l'ignorance de la vanité des plaisirs absents, causent l'inconstance.
—PASCAL

Rosamond had a gleam of returning cheerfulness when the house was freed from the threatening figure and when all the disagreeable creditors were paid. But she was not joyous; her married life had fulfilled none of her hopes and had been quite spoiled for her imagination. In this brief interval of calm, Lydgate, remembering that he had often been stormy in his hours of perturbation, and mindful of the pain Rosamond had had to bear, was carefully gentle towards her; but he, too, had lost some of his old spirit, and he still felt it necessary to refer to an economical change in their way of living as a matter of course, trying to reconcile her to it gradually and repressing his anger when she answered by wishing that he would go to live in London. When he did not make this answer, she listened languidly and wondered what she had that was worth living for. The hard and contemptuous words which had fallen from her husband in his anger had deeply offended that vanity which he had at first called into active enjoyment; and what she regarded as his perverse way of looking at things kept up a secret repulsion, which made her receive all his tenderness as a poor substitute for the happiness he had failed to give her. They were at a disadvantage with their neighbours, and there was no longer any outlook towards Quallingham—there was no outlook anywhere except in an occasional letter from Will Ladislaw. She had felt stung and disappointed by Will's resolution to quit Middlemarch, for in spite of what she knew and guessed about his admiration for Dorothea, she secretly cherished the belief that he had, or would necessarily come to have, much more admiration for herself, Rosamond being one of those women who live much in the idea that each man they meet would have preferred them if the preference had not been hopeless. Mrs. Casaubon was all very well, but Will's interest in her dated before he knew Mrs. Lydgate. Rosamond took his way of talking to herself, which was a mixture of playful fault-finding and hyperbolical gallantry, as the disguise of a deeper feeling; and in his presence she felt that agreeable titillation of vanity and sense of romantic drama which Lydgate's presence had no longer the magic to create. She even fancied—what will not men and women fancy in these matters?—that Will exaggerated his admiration for Mrs. Casaubon in order to pique herself. In this way poor Rosamond's brain had been busy before Will's departure. He would have made, she thought, a much more suitable husband for her than she had found in Lydgate. No notion could have been falser than this, for Rosamond's discontent in her marriage was due to the conditions of marriage itself, to its demand for self-suppression and tolerance, and not to the nature of her husband; but the easy conception of an unreal Better had a sentimental charm which diverted her ennui. She constructed a little romance which was to vary the flatness of her life: Will Ladislaw was always to be a bachelor and live near her, always to be at her command, and have an understood though never fully expressed passion for her, which would be sending out lambent flames every now and then in interesting scenes. His departure had been a proportionate disappointment and had sadly increased her weariness of Middlemarch; but at first she had the alternative dream of pleasures in store from her intercourse with the family at Quallingham. Since then the troubles of her married life had deepened, and the absence of other relief encouraged her regretful rumination over that thin romance which she had once fed on. Men and women make sad mistakes about their own symptoms, taking their vague, uneasy longings sometimes for genius, sometimes for religion, and oftener still for a mighty love. Will Ladislaw had written chatty letters, half to her and half to Lydgate, and she had replied; their separation, she felt, was not likely to be final, and the change she now most longed for was that Lydgate should go to live in London; everything would be agreeable in London; and she had set to work with quiet determination to win this result when there came a sudden, delightful promise which inspirited her.

It came shortly before the memorable meeting at the town-hall and was nothing less than a letter from Will Ladislaw to Lydgate, which turned indeed chiefly on his new interest in plans of colonization, but mentioned incidentally that he might find it necessary to pay a visit to Middlemarch within the next few weeks—a very pleasant necessity, he said, almost as good as holidays to a schoolboy. He hoped there was his old place on the rug and a great deal of music in store for him. But he was quite uncertain as to the time. While Lydgate was reading the letter to Rosamond, her face looked like a reviving flower—it grew prettier and more blooming. There was nothing unendurable now; the debts were paid, Mr. Ladislaw was coming, and Lydgate would be persuaded to leave Middlemarch and settle in London, which was "so different from a provincial town."

That was a bright bit of morning. But soon the sky became black over poor Rosamond. The presence of a new gloom in her husband, about which he was entirely reserved towards her, for he dreaded to expose his lacerated feeling to her neutrality and misconception, soon received a painfully strange explanation, alien to all her previous notions of what could affect her happiness. In the new gaiety of her spirits, thinking that Lydgate had merely a worse fit of moodiness than usual, causing him to leave her remarks unanswered, and evidently to keep out of her way as much as possible, she chose, a few days after the meeting, and without speaking to him on the subject, to send out notes of invitation for a small evening party, feeling convinced that this was a judicious step since people seemed to have been keeping aloof from them and wanted restoring to the old habit of intercourse. When the invitations had been accepted, she would tell Lydgate and give him a wise admonition as to how a medical man should behave to his neighbours, for Rosamond had the gravest little airs

possible about other people's duties. But all the invitations were declined, and the last answer came into Lydgate's hands.

"This is Chichely's scratch. What is he writing to you about?" said Lydgate wonderingly as he handed the note to her. She was obliged to let him see it, and looking at her severely, he said, "Why on earth have you been sending out invitations without telling me, Rosamond? I beg, I insist, that you will not invite anyone to this house. I suppose you have been inviting others, and they have refused too."

She said nothing.

"Do you hear me?" thundered Lydgate.

"Yes, certainly I hear you," said Rosamond, turning her head aside with the movement of a graceful, long-necked bird.

Lydgate tossed his head without any grace and walked out of the room, feeling himself dangerous. Rosamond's thought was that he was getting more and more unbearable, not that there was any new special reason for this peremptoriness. His indisposition to tell her anything in which he was sure beforehand that she would not be interested was growing into an unreflecting habit, and she was in ignorance of everything connected with the thousand pounds except that the loan had come from her uncle Bulstrode. Lydgate's odious humours and their neighbours' apparent avoidance of them had an unaccountable date for her in their relief from money difficulties. If the invitations had been accepted she would have gone to invite her mamma and the rest, whom she had seen nothing of for several days; and she now put on her bonnet to go and inquire what had become of them all, suddenly feeling as if there were a conspiracy to leave her in isolation with a husband disposed to offend everybody. It was after the dinner hour, and she found her father and mother seated together alone in the drawing-room. They greeted her with sad looks, saying, "Well, my dear!" and no more. She had never seen her father look so downcast, and seating herself near him, she said, "Is there anything the matter, Papa?"

He did not answer, but Mrs. Vincy said, "Oh, my dear, have you heard nothing? It won't be long before it reaches you."

"Is it anything about Tertius?" said Rosamond, turning pale. The idea of trouble immediately connected itself with what had been unaccountable to her in him.

"Oh my dear, yes. To think of your marrying into this trouble. Debt was bad enough, but this will be worse."

"Stay, stay, Lucy," said Mr. Vincy. "Have you heard nothing about your uncle Bulstrode, Rosamond?"

"No, Papa," said the poor thing, feeling as if trouble were not anything she had before experienced, but some invisible power with an iron grasp that made her soul faint within her.

Her father told her everything, saying at the end, "It's better for you to know, my dear. I think Lydgate must leave the town. Things have gone against him. I dare say he couldn't help it. I don't accuse him of any harm," said Mr. Vincy. He had always before been disposed to find the utmost fault with Lydgate.

The shock to Rosamond was terrible. It seemed to her that no lot could be so cruelly hard as hers—to have married a man who had become the centre of infamous suspicions. In many cases it is believed that the shame is felt to be the worst part of crime; and it would have required a great deal of disentangling reflection, such as had never entered into Rosamond's life, for her in these moments to feel that her trouble was less than if her husband had been certainly known to have done something criminal. All the shame seemed to be there. And she had innocently married this man with the belief that he and his family were a glory to her! She showed her usual reticence to her parents and only said that if Lydgate had done as she wished he would have left Middlemarch long ago.

"She bears it beyond anything," said her mother when she was gone.

"Ah, thank God!" said Mr. Vincy, who was much broken down.

But Rosamond went home with a sense of justified repugnance towards her husband. What had he really done—how had he really acted? She did not know. Why had he not told her everything? He did not speak to her on the subject, and of course she could not speak to him. It came into her mind once that she would ask her father to let her go home again, but dwelling on that prospect made it seem utter dreariness to her: a married woman gone back to live with her parents—life seemed to have no meaning for her in such a position; she could not contemplate herself in it.

The next two days Lydgate observed a change in her and believed that she had heard the bad news. Would she speak to him about it or would she go on forever in the silence which seemed to imply that she believed him guilty? We must remember that he was in a morbid state of mind, in which almost all contact was pain. Certainly Rosamond in this case had equal reason to complain of reserve and want of confidence on his part; but in the bitterness of his soul he excused himself. Was he not justified in shrinking from the task of telling her, since now she knew the truth she had no impulse to speak to him? But a deeper-lying consciousness that he was in fault made him restless, and the silence between them became intolerable to him; it was as if they were both adrift on one piece of wreck and looked away from each other.

He thought, "I am a fool. Haven't I given up expecting anything? I have married care, not help." And that evening he said, "Rosamond, have you heard anything that distresses you?"

"Yes," she answered, laying down her work, which she had been carrying on with a languid semi-consciousness, most unlike her usual self.

"What have you heard?"

"Everything, I suppose. Papa told me."

"That people think me disgraced?"

"Yes," said Rosamond faintly, beginning to sew again automatically.

There was silence. Lydgate thought, "If she has any trust in me, any notion of what I am, she ought to speak now and say that she does not believe I have deserved disgrace."

But Rosamond on her side went on moving her fingers languidly. Whatever was to be said on the subject she expected to come from Tertius. What did she know? And if he were innocent of any wrong, why did he not do something to clear himself?

This silence of hers brought a new rush of gall to that bitter mood in which Lydgate had been saying to himself that nobody believed in him—even Farebrother had not come forward. He had begun to question her with the intent that their conversation should disperse the chill fog which had gathered between them, but he felt his resolution checked by despairing resentment. Even this trouble, like the rest, she seemed to regard as if it were hers alone. He was always to her a

being apart, doing what she objected to. He started from his chair with an angry impulse, and thrusting his hands in his pockets, walked up and down the room. There was an underlying consciousness all the while that he should have to master this anger and tell her everything and convince her of the facts. For he had almost learned the lesson that he must bend himself to her nature and that because she came short in her sympathy, he must give the more. Soon he recurred to his intention of opening himself; the occasion must not be lost. If he could bring her to feel with some solemnity that here was a slander which must be met and not run away from and that the whole trouble had come out of his desperate want of money, it would be a moment for urging powerfully on her that they should be one in the resolve to do with as little money as possible so that they might weather the bad time and keep themselves independent. He would mention the definite measures which he desired to take and win her to a willing spirit. He was bound to try this, and what else was there for him to do?

He did not know how long he had been walking uneasily backwards and forwards, but Rosamond felt that it was long and wished that he would sit down. She too had begun to think this an opportunity for urging on Tertius what he ought to do. Whatever might be the truth about all this misery, there was one dread which asserted itself.

Lydgate at last seated himself, not in his usual chair, but in one nearer to Rosamond, leaning aside in it towards her and looking at her gravely before he reopened the sad subject. He had conquered himself so far and was about to speak with a sense of solemnity, as on an occasion which was not to be repeated. He had even opened his lips when Rosamond, letting her hands fall, looked at him and said, “Surely, Tertius—”

“Well?”

“Surely now at last you have given up the idea of staying in Middlemarch. I cannot go on living here. Let us go to London. Papa, and everyone else, says you had better go. Whatever misery I have to put up with, it will be easier away from here.”

Lydgate felt miserably jarred. Instead of that critical outpouring for which he had prepared himself with effort, here was the old round to be gone through again. He could not bear it. With a quick change of countenance he rose and went out of the room.

Perhaps if he had been strong enough to persist in his determination to be the more because she was less, that evening might have had a better issue. If his energy could have borne down that check, he might still have wrought on Rosamond’s vision and will. We cannot be sure that any natures, however inflexible or peculiar, will resist this effect from a more massive being than their own. They may be taken by storm and for the moment converted, becoming part of the soul which enwraps them in the ardour of its movement. But poor Lydgate had a throbbing pain within him, and his energy had fallen short of its task.

The beginning of mutual understanding and resolve seemed as far off as ever; nay, it seemed blocked out by the sense of unsuccessful effort. They lived on from day to day with their thoughts still apart, Lydgate going about what work he had in a mood of despair and Rosamond feeling, with some justification, that he was behaving cruelly. It was of no use to say anything to Tertius; but when Will Ladislaw came, she was determined to tell him everything. In spite of her general reticence, she needed someone who would recognize her wrongs.

CHAPTER 76

To mercy, pity, peace, and love
All pray in their distress,
And to these virtues of delight,
Return their thankfulness.
• • • • • • • • •
For Mercy has a human heart,
Pity a human face;
And Love, the human form divine;
And Peace, the human dress.

—WILLIAM BLAKE: *Songs of Innocence*

Some days later, Lydgate was riding to Lowick Manor in consequence of a summons from Dorothea. The summons had not been unexpected, since it had followed a letter from Mr. Bulstrode, in which he stated that he had resumed his arrangements for quitting Middlemarch and must remind Lydgate of his previous communications about the hospital, to the purport of which he still adhered. It had been his duty, before taking further steps, to reopen the subject with Mrs. Casaubon, who now wished, as before, to discuss the question with Lydgate. “Your views may possibly have undergone some change,” wrote Mr. Bulstrode; “but in that case also, it is desirable that you should lay them before her.”

Dorothea awaited his arrival with eager interest. Though in deference to her masculine advisers she had refrained from what Sir James had called “interfering in this Bulstrode business,” the hardship of Lydgate’s position was continually in her mind, and when Bulstrode applied to her again about the hospital, she felt that the opportunity was come to her which she had been hindered from hastening. In her luxurious home, wandering under the boughs of her own great trees, her thought was going out over the lot of others, and her emotions were imprisoned. The idea of some active good within her reach “haunted her like a passion,” and another’s need having once come to her as a distinct image preoccupied her desire with the yearning to give relief and made her own ease tasteless. She was full of confident hope about this interview with Lydgate, never heeding what was said of his personal reserve, never heeding that she was a very young woman. Nothing could have seemed more irrelevant to Dorothea than insistence on her youth and sex when she was moved to show her human fellowship.

As she sat waiting in the library, she could do nothing but live through again all the past scenes which had brought Lydgate into her memories. They all owed their significance to her marriage and its troubles—but no; there were two occasions in which the image of Lydgate had come painfully in connexion with his wife and someone else. The pain had been allayed for Dorothea, but it had left in her an awakened conjecture as to what Lydgate’s marriage might be to him, a susceptibility to the slightest hint about Mrs. Lydgate. These thoughts were like a drama to her and made her eyes bright and gave an attitude of suspense to her whole frame, though she was only looking out from the brown library on to the turf and the bright green buds which stood in relief against the dark evergreens.

When Lydgate came in, she was almost shocked at the change in his face, which was strikingly perceptible to her who had not seen him for two months. It was not the change of emaciation, but that effect which even young faces will very soon show from the persistent presence of resentment and despondency. Her cordial look, when she put out her hand to him, softened his expression, but only with melancholy.

“I have wished very much to see you for a long while, Mr. Lydgate,” said Dorothea when they were seated opposite each other; “but I put off asking you to come until Mr. Bulstrode applied to me again about the hospital. I know that the advantage of keeping the management of it separate from that of the infirmary depends on you, or, at least, on the good which you are encouraged to hope for from having it under your control. And I am sure you will not refuse to tell me exactly what you think.”

“You want to decide whether you should give a generous support to the hospital,” said Lydgate. “I cannot conscientiously advise you to do it in dependence on any activity of mine. I may be obliged to leave the town.”

He spoke curtly, feeling the ache of despair as to his being able to carry out any purpose that Rosamond had set her mind against.

“Not because there is no one to believe in you?” said Dorothea, pouring out her words in clearness from a full heart. “I know the unhappy mistakes about you. I knew them from the first moment to be mistakes. You have never done anything vile. You would not do anything dishonourable.”

It was the first assurance of belief in him that had fallen on Lydgate’s ears. He drew a deep breath and said, “Thank you.” He could say no more; it was something very new and strange in his life that these few words of trust from a woman should be so much to him.

“I beseech you to tell me how everything was,” said Dorothea fearlessly. “I am sure that the truth would clear you.”

Lydgate started up from his chair and went towards the window, forgetting where he was. He had so often gone over in his mind the possibility of explaining everything without aggravating appearances that would tell, perhaps unfairly, against Bulstrode, and had so often decided against it—he had so often said to himself that his assertions would not change people’s impressions—that Dorothea’s words sounded like a temptation to do something which in his soberness he had

pronounced to be unreasonable.

"Tell me, pray," said Dorothea with simple earnestness; "then we can consult together. It is wicked to let people think evil of anyone falsely when it can be hindered."

Lydgate turned, remembering where he was, and saw Dorothea's face looking up at him with a sweet, trustful gravity. The presence of a noble nature, generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity, changes the lights for us: we begin to see things again in their larger, quieter masses and to believe that we too can be seen and judged in the wholeness of our character. That influence was beginning to act on Lydgate, who had for many days been seeing all life as one who is dragged and struggling amid the throng. He sat down again and felt that he was with one who believed in it.

"I don't want," he said, "to bear hard on Bulstrode, who has lent me money of which I was in need—though I would rather have gone without it now. He is hunted down and miserable and has only a poor thread of life in him. But I should like to tell you everything. It will be a comfort to me to speak where belief has gone beforehand and where I shall not seem to be offering assertions of my own honesty. You will feel what is fair to another, as you feel what is fair to me."

"Do trust me," said Dorothea; "I will not repeat anything without your leave. But at the very least, I could say that you have made all the circumstances clear to me and that I know you are not in any way guilty. Mr. Farebrother would believe me, and my uncle, and Sir James Chettam. Nay, there are persons in Middlemarch to whom I could go; although they don't know much of me, they would believe me. They would know that I could have no other motive than truth and justice. I would take any pains to clear you. I have very little to do. There is nothing better that I can do in the world."

Dorothea's voice, as she made this childlike picture of what she would do, might have been almost taken as a proof that she could do it effectively. The searching tenderness of her woman's tones seemed made for a defence against ready accusers. Lydgate did not stay to think that she was quixotic; he gave himself up, for the first time in his life, to the exquisite sense of leaning entirely on a generous sympathy without any check of proud reserve. And he told her everything, from the time when, under the pressure of his difficulties, he unwillingly made his first application to Bulstrode, gradually, in the relief of speaking, getting into a more thorough utterance of what had gone on in his mind—entering fully into the fact that his treatment of the patient was opposed to the dominant practice, into his doubts at the last, his ideal of medical duty, and his uneasy consciousness that the acceptance of the money had made some difference in his private inclination and professional behaviour, though not in his fulfilment of any publicly recognized obligation.

"It has come to my knowledge since," he added, "that Hawley sent someone to examine the housekeeper at Stone Court, and she said that she gave the patient all the opium in the phial I left, as well as a good deal of brandy. But that would not have been opposed to ordinary prescriptions, even of first-rate men. The suspicions against me had no hold there; they are grounded on the knowledge that I took money, that Bulstrode had strong motives for wishing the man to die, and that he gave me the money as a bribe to concur in some malpractices or other against the patient—that in any case I accepted a bribe to hold my tongue. They are just the suspicions that cling the most obstinately because they lie in people's inclination and can never be disproved. How my orders came to be disobeyed is a question to which I don't know the answer. It is still possible that Bulstrode was innocent of any criminal intention—even possible that he had nothing to do with the disobedience and merely abstained from mentioning it. But all that has nothing to do with the public belief. It is one of those cases on which a man is condemned on the ground of his character—it is believed that he has committed a crime in some undefined way because he had the motive for doing it; and Bulstrode's character has enveloped me because I took his money. I am simply blighted—like a damaged ear of corn—the business is done and can't be undone."

"Oh, it is hard!" said Dorothea. "I understand the difficulty there is in your vindicating yourself. And that all this should have come to you who had meant to lead a higher life than the common, and to find out better ways—I cannot bear to rest in this as unchangeable. I know you meant that. I remember what you said to me when you first spoke to me about the hospital. There is no sorrow I have thought more about than that—to love what is great, and try to reach it, and yet to fail."

"Yes," said Lydgate, feeling that here he had found room for the full meaning of his grief. "I had some ambition. I meant everything to be different with me. I thought I had more strength and mastery. But the most terrible obstacles are such as nobody can see except oneself."

"Suppose," said Dorothea meditatively. "Suppose we kept on the hospital according to the present plan, and you stayed here though only with the friendship and support of a few, the evil feeling towards you would gradually die out; there would come opportunities in which people would be forced to acknowledge that they had been unjust to you because they would see that your purposes were pure. You may still win a great fame like the Louis and Laennec I have heard you speak of, and we shall all be proud of you," she ended with a smile.

"That might do if I had my old trust in myself," said Lydgate mournfully. "Nothing galls me more than the notion of turning round and running away before this slander, leaving it unchecked behind me. Still, I can't ask anyone to put a great deal of money into a plan which depends on me."

"It would be quite worth my while," said Dorothea simply. "Only think. I am very uncomfortable with my money because they tell me I have too little for any great scheme of the sort I like best, and yet I have too much. I don't know what to do. I have seven hundred a year of my own fortune, and nineteen hundred a year that Mr. Casaubon left me, and between three and four thousand of ready money in the bank. I wished to raise money and pay it off gradually out of my income which I don't want, to buy land with and found a village which should be a school of industry; but Sir James and my uncle have convinced me that the risk would be too great. So you see that what I should most rejoice at would be to have something good to do with my money; I should like it to make other people's lives better to them. It makes me very uneasy—coming all to me who don't want it."

A smile broke through the gloom of Lydgate's face. The childlike, grave-eyed earnestness with which Dorothea said all this was irresistible—blent into an adorable whole with her ready understanding of high experience. (Of lower experience such as plays a great part in the world, poor Mrs. Casaubon had a very blurred, short-sighted knowledge, little helped by her imagination.) But she took the smile as encouragement of her plan.

"I think you see now that you spoke too scrupulously," she said in a tone of persuasion. "The hospital would be one

good, and making your life quite whole and well again would be another."

Lydgate's smile had died away. "You have the goodness as well as the money to do all that; if it could be done," he said. "But—"

He hesitated a little while, looking vaguely towards the window; and she sat in silent expectation. At last he turned towards her and said impetuously, "Why should I not tell you? You know what sort of bond marriage is. You will understand everything."

Dorothea felt her heart beginning to beat faster. Had he that sorrow too? But she feared to say any word, and he went on immediately.

"It is impossible for me now to do anything—to take any step without considering my wife's happiness. The thing that I might like to do if I were alone is become impossible to me. I can't see her miserable. She married me without knowing what she was going into, and it might have been better for her if she had not married me."

"I know, I know—you could not give her pain if you were not obliged to do it," said Dorothea with keen memory of her own life.

"And she has set her mind against staying. She wishes to go. The troubles she has had here have wearied her," said Lydgate, breaking off again lest he should say too much.

"But when she saw the good that might come of staying—" said Dorothea remonstrantly, looking at Lydgate as if he had forgotten the reasons which had just been considered. He did not speak immediately.

"She would not see it," he said at last curtly, feeling at first that this statement must do without explanation. "And, indeed, I have lost all spirit about carrying on my life here." He paused a moment, and then, following the impulse to let Dorothea see deeper into the difficulty of his life, he said, "The fact is, this trouble has come upon her confusedly. We have not been able to speak to each other about it. I am not sure what is in her mind about it; she may fear that I have really done something base. It is my fault; I ought to be more open. But I have been suffering cruelly."

"May I go and see her?" said Dorothea eagerly. "Would she accept my sympathy? I would tell her that you have not been blameable before anyone's judgement but your own. I would tell her that you shall be cleared in every fair mind. I would cheer her heart. Will you ask her if I may go to see her? I did see her once."

"I am sure you may," said Lydgate, seizing the proposition with some hope. "She would feel honoured—cheered, I think, by the proof that you at least have some respect for me. I will not speak to her about your coming—that she may not connect it with my wishes at all. I know very well that I ought not to have left anything to be told her by others, but—"

He broke off, and there was a moment's silence. Dorothea refrained from saying what was in her mind—how well she knew that there might be invisible barriers to speech between husband and wife. This was a point on which even sympathy might make a wound. She returned to the more outward aspect of Lydgate's position, saying cheerfully, "And if Mrs. Lydgate knew that there were friends who would believe in you and support you, she might then be glad that you should stay in your place and recover your hopes—and do what you meant to do. Perhaps then you would see that it was right to agree with what I proposed about your continuing at the hospital. Surely you would, if you still have faith in it as a means of making your knowledge useful?"

Lydgate did not answer, and she saw that he was debating with himself.

"You need not decide immediately," she said gently. "A few days hence it will be early enough for me to send my answer to Mr. Bulstrode."

Lydgate still waited, but at last turned to speak in his most decisive tones.

"No; I prefer that there should be no interval left for wavering. I am no longer sure enough of myself—I mean of what it would be possible for me to do under the changed circumstances of my life. It would be dishonourable to let others engage themselves to anything serious in dependence on me. I might be obliged to go away after all; I see little chance of anything else. The whole thing is too problematic; I cannot consent to be the cause of your goodness being wasted. No—let the new hospital be joined with the old infirmary and everything go on as it might have done if I had never come. I have kept a valuable register since I have been there; I shall send it to a man who will make use of it," he ended bitterly. "I can think of nothing for a long while but getting an income."

"It hurts me very much to hear you speak so hopelessly," said Dorothea. "It would be a happiness to your friends, who believe in your future, in your power to do great things, if you would let them save you from that. Think how much money I have; it would be like taking a burden from me if you took some of it every year till you got free from this fettering want of income. Why should not people do these things? It is so difficult to make shares at all even. This is one way."

"God bless you, Mrs. Casaubon!" said Lydgate, rising as if with the same impulse that made his words energetic and resting his arm on the back of the great leather chair he had been sitting in. "It is good that you should have such feelings. But I am not the man who ought to allow himself to benefit by them. I have not given guarantees enough. I must not at least sink into the degradation of being pensioned for work that I never achieved. It is very clear to me that I must not count on anything else than getting away from Middlemarch as soon as I can manage it. I should not be able for a long while, at the very best, to get an income here, and—and it is easier to make necessary changes in a new place. I must do as other men do and think what will please the world and bring in money; look for a little opening in the London crowd, and push myself; set up in a watering-place, or go to some southern town where there are plenty of idle English, and get myself puffed—that is the sort of shell I must creep into and try to keep my soul alive in."

"Now that is not brave," said Dorothea, "to give up the fight."

"No, it is not brave," said Lydgate, "but if a man is afraid of creeping paralysis?" Then, in another tone, "Yet you have made a great difference in my courage by believing in me. Everything seems more bearable since I have talked to you; and if you can clear me in a few other minds, especially in Farebrother's, I shall be deeply grateful. The point I wish you not to mention is the fact of disobedience to my orders. That would soon get distorted. After all, there is no evidence for me but people's opinion of me beforehand. You can only repeat my own report of myself."

"Mr. Farebrother will believe—others will believe," said Dorothea. "I can say of you what will make it stupidity to suppose that you would be bribed to do a wickedness."

“I don’t know,” said Lydgate with something like a groan in his voice. “I have not taken a bribe yet. But there is a pale shade of bribery which is sometimes called prosperity. You will do me another great kindness, then, and come to see my wife?”

“Yes, I will. I remember how pretty she is,” said Dorothea, into whose mind every impression about Rosamond had cut deep. “I hope she will like me.”

As Lydgate rode away, he thought, “This young creature has a heart large enough for the Virgin Mary. She evidently thinks nothing of her own future and would pledge away half her income at once, as if she wanted nothing for herself but a chair to sit in from which she can look down with those clear eyes at the poor mortals who pray to her. She seems to have what I never saw in any woman before—a fountain of friendship towards men, a man can make a friend of her. Casaubon must have raised some heroic hallucination in her. I wonder if she could have any other sort of passion for a man? Ladislaw? There was certainly an unusual feeling between them. And Casaubon must have had a notion of it. Well—her love might help a man more than her money.”

Dorothea on her side had immediately formed a plan of relieving Lydgate from his obligation to Bulstrode, which she felt sure was a part, though small, of the galling pressure he had to bear. She sat down at once under the inspiration of their interview and wrote a brief note, in which she pleaded that she had more claim than Mr. Bulstrode had to the satisfaction of providing the money which had been serviceable to Lydgate—that it would be unkind in Lydgate not to grant her the position of being his helper in this small matter, the favour being entirely to her who had so little that was plainly marked out for her to do with her superfluous money. He might call her a creditor or by any other name if it did but imply that he granted her request. She enclosed a cheque for a thousand pounds and determined to take the letter with her the next day when she went to see Rosamond.

CHAPTER 77

And thus thy fall hath left a kind of blot,
To mark the full-fraught man and best indued
With some suspicion.

—*Henry V*

The next day Lydgate had to go to Brassing and told Rosamond that he should be away until the evening. Of late she had never gone beyond her own house and garden, except to church, and once to see her papa, to whom she said, “If Tertius goes away, you will help us to move, will you not, Papa? I suppose we shall have very little money. I am sure I hope someone will help us.” And Mr. Vincy had said, “Yes, child, I don’t mind a hundred or two. I can see the end of that.” With these exceptions she had sat at home in languid melancholy and suspense, fixing her mind on Will Ladislaw’s coming as the one point of hope and interest and associating this with some new urgency on Lydgate to make immediate arrangements for leaving Middlemarch and going to London, till she felt assured that the coming would be a potent cause of the going, without at all seeing how. This way of establishing sequences is too common to be fairly regarded as a peculiar folly in Rosamond. And it is precisely this sort of sequence which causes the greatest shock when it is sundered, for to see how an effect may be produced is often to see possible missings and checks; but to see nothing except the desirable cause and close upon it the desirable effect rids us of doubt and makes our minds strongly intuitive. That was the process going on in poor Rosamond while she arranged all objects around her with the same nicety as ever, only with more slowness—or sat down to the piano, meaning to play, and then desisting, yet lingering on the music stool with her white fingers suspended on the wooden front and looking before her in dreamy ennui. Her melancholy had become so marked that Lydgate felt a strange timidity before it, as a perpetual silent reproach, and the strong man, mastered by his keen sensibilities towards this fair, fragile creature whose life he seemed somehow to have bruised, shrank from her look and sometimes started at her approach, fear of her and fear for her rushing in only the more forcibly after it had been momentarily expelled by exasperation.

But this morning Rosamond descended from her room upstairs, where she sometimes sat the whole day when Lydgate was out, equipped for a walk in the town. She had a letter to post, a letter addressed to Mr. Ladislaw and written with charming discretion, but intended to hasten his arrival by a hint of trouble. The servant-maid, their sole houseservant now, noticed her coming downstairs in her walking-dress and thought, “There never did anybody look so pretty in a bonnet, poor thing.”

Meanwhile Dorothea’s mind was filled with her project of going to Rosamond and with the many thoughts, both of the past and the probable future, which gathered round the idea of that visit. Until yesterday when Lydgate had opened to her a glimpse of some trouble in his married life, the image of Mrs. Lydgate had always been associated for her with that of Will Ladislaw. Even in her most uneasy moments—even when she had been agitated by Mrs. Cadwallader’s painfully graphic report of gossip—her effort, nay, her strongest impulsive prompting, had been towards the vindication of Will from any sullying surmises; and when, in her meeting with him afterwards, she had at first interpreted his words as a probable allusion to a feeling towards Mrs. Lydgate which he was determined to cut himself off from indulging, she had had a quick, sad, excusing vision of the charm there might be in his constant opportunities of companionship with that fair creature, who most likely shared his other tastes as she evidently did his delight in music. But there had followed his parting words—the few passionate words in which he had implied that she herself was the object of whom his love held him in dread, that it was his love for her only which he was resolved not to declare but to carry away into banishment. From the time of that parting, Dorothea, believing in Will’s love for her, believing with a proud delight in his delicate sense of honour and his determination that no one should impeach him justly, felt her heart quite at rest as to the regard he might have for Mrs. Lydgate. She was sure that the regard was blameless.

There are natures in which, if they love us, we are conscious of having a sort of baptism and consecration: they bind us over to rectitude and purity by their pure belief about us; and our sins become that worst kind of sacrilege which tears down the invisible altar of trust. “If you are not good, none is good”—those little words may give a terrific meaning to responsibility, may hold a vitriolic intensity for remorse.

Dorothea’s nature was of that kind; her own passionate faults lay along the easily counted open channels of her ardent character; and while she was full of pity for the visible mistakes of others, she had not yet any material within her experience for subtle constructions and suspicions of hidden wrong. But that simplicity of hers, holding up an ideal for others in her believing conception of them, was one of the great powers of her womanhood. And it had from the first acted strongly on Will Ladislaw. He felt, when he parted from her, that the brief words by which he had tried to convey to her his feeling about herself and the division which her fortune made between them would only profit by their brevity when Dorothea had to interpret them; he felt that in her mind he had found his highest estimate.

And he was right there. In the months since their parting, Dorothea had felt a delicious though sad repose in their relation to each other, as one which was inwardly whole and without blemish. She had an active force of antagonism within her when the antagonism turned on the defence either of plans or persons that she believed in, and the wrongs which she felt that Will had received from her husband and the external conditions which to others were grounds for

slighting him only gave the more tenacity to her affection and admiring judgement. And now with the disclosures about Bulstrode had come another fact affecting Will's social position, which roused afresh Dorothea's inward resistance to what was said about him in that part of her world which lay within park palings.

"Young Ladislaw, the grandson of a thieving Jew pawnbroker" was a phrase which had entered emphatically into the dialogues about the Bulstrode business at Lowick, Tipton, and Freshitt and was a worse kind of placard on poor Will's back than the "Italian with white mice." Upright Sir James Chettam was convinced that his own satisfaction was righteous when he thought with some complacency that here was an added league to that mountainous distance between Ladislaw and Dorothea, which enabled him to dismiss any anxiety in that direction as too absurd. And perhaps there had been some pleasure in pointing Mr. Brooke's attention to this ugly bit of Ladislaw's genealogy as a fresh candle for him to see his own folly by. Dorothea had observed the animus with which Will's part in the painful story had been recalled more than once; but she had uttered no word, being checked now, as she had not been formerly in speaking of Will, by the consciousness of a deeper relation between them which must always remain in consecrated secrecy. But her silence shrouded her resistant emotion into a more thorough glow; and this misfortune in Will's lot which, it seemed, others were wishing to fling at his back as an opprobrium only gave something more of enthusiasm to her clinging thought.

She entertained no visions of their ever coming into nearer union, and yet she had taken no posture of renunciation. She had accepted her whole relation to Will very simply as part of her marriage sorrows and would have thought it very sinful in her to keep up an inward wail because she was not completely happy, being rather disposed to dwell on the superfluities of her lot. She could bear that the chief pleasures of her tenderness should lie in memory, and the idea of marriage came to her solely as a repulsive proposition from some suitor of whom she at present knew nothing, but whose merits, as seen by her friends, would be a source of torment to her—"Somebody who will manage your property for you, my dear," was Mr. Brooke's attractive suggestion of suitable characteristics. "I should like to manage it myself if I knew what to do with it," said Dorothea. No, she adhered to her declaration that she would never be married again, and in the long valley of her life, which looked so flat and empty of way-marks, guidance would come as she walked along the road and saw her fellow-passengers by the way.

This habitual state of feeling about Will Ladislaw had been strong in all her waking hours since she had proposed to pay a visit to Mrs. Lydgate, making a sort of background against which she saw Rosamond's figure presented to her without hindrances to her interest and compassion. There was evidently some mental separation, some barrier to complete confidence which had arisen between this wife and the husband who had yet made her happiness a law to him. That was a trouble which no third person must directly touch. But Dorothea thought with deep pity of the loneliness which must have come upon Rosamond from the suspicions cast on her husband; and there would surely be help in the manifestation of respect for Lydgate and sympathy with her.

"I shall talk to her about her husband," thought Dorothea as she was being driven towards the town. The clear spring morning, the scent of the moist earth, the fresh leaves just showing their creased-up wealth of greenery from out their half-opened sheaths, seemed part of the cheerfulness she was feeling from a long conversation with Mr. Farebrother, who had joyfully accepted the justifying explanation of Lydgate's conduct. "I shall take Mrs. Lydgate good news, and perhaps she will like to talk to me and make a friend of me."

Dorothea had another errand in Lowick Gate; it was about a new fine-toned bell for the schoolhouse, and as she had to get out of her carriage very near to Lydgate's, she walked thither across the street, having told the coachman to wait for some packages. The street door was open, and the servant was taking the opportunity of looking out at the carriage which was pausing within sight when it became apparent to her that the lady who "belonged to it" was coming towards her.

"Is Mrs. Lydgate at home?" said Dorothea.

"I'm not sure, my lady; I'll see, if you'll please to walk in," said Martha, a little confused on the score of her kitchen apron but collected enough to be sure that "mum" was not the right title for this queenly young widow with a carriage and pair. "Will you please to walk in, and I'll go and see."

"Say that I am Mrs. Casaubon," said Dorothea as Martha moved forward intending to show her into the drawing-room and then to go upstairs to see if Rosamond had returned from her walk.

They crossed the broader part of the entrance-hall and turned up the passage which led to the garden. The drawing-room door was unlatched, and Martha, pushing it without looking into the room, waited for Mrs. Casaubon to enter and then turned away, the door having swung open and swung back again without noise.

Dorothea had less of outward vision than usual this morning, being filled with images of things as they had been and were going to be. She found herself on the other side of the door without seeing anything remarkable, but immediately she heard a voice speaking in low tones which startled her as with a sense of dreaming in daylight, and advancing unconsciously a step or two beyond the projecting slab of a bookcase, she saw, in the terrible illumination of a certainty which filled up all outlines, something which made her pause motionless, without self-possession enough to speak.

Seated with his back towards her on a sofa which stood against the wall on a line with the door by which she had entered, she saw Will Ladislaw; close by him and turned towards him with a flushed tearfulness which gave a new brilliancy to her face sat Rosamond, her bonnet hanging back, while Will leaning towards her clasped both her upraised hands in his and spoke with low-toned fervour.

Rosamond in her agitated absorption had not noticed the silently advancing figure; but when Dorothea, after the first immeasurable instant of this vision, moved confusedly backward and found herself impeded by some piece of furniture, Rosamond was suddenly aware of her presence, and with a spasmodic movement snatched away her hands and rose, looking at Dorothea, who was necessarily arrested. Will Ladislaw, starting up, looked round also, and meeting Dorothea's eyes with a new lightning in them, seemed changing to marble. But she immediately turned them away from him to Rosamond and said in a firm voice, "Excuse me, Mrs. Lydgate, the servant did not know that you were here. I called to deliver an important letter for Mr. Lydgate, which I wished to put into your own hands."

She laid down the letter on the small table which had checked her retreat, and then including Rosamond and Will in one distant glance and bow, she went quickly out of the room, meeting in the passage the surprised Martha, who said she was

sorry the mistress was not at home and then showed the strange lady out with an inward reflection that grand people were probably more impatient than others.

Dorothea walked across the street with her most elastic step and was quickly in her carriage again.

"Drive on to Freshitt Hall," she said to the coachman, and anyone looking at her might have thought that though she was paler than usual she was never animated by a more self-possessed energy. And that was really her experience. It was as if she had drunk a great draught of scorn that stimulated her beyond the susceptibility to other feelings. She had seen something so far below her belief that her emotions rushed back from it and made an excited throng without an object. She needed something active to turn her excitement out upon. She felt power to walk and work for a day, without meat or drink. And she would carry out the purpose with which she had started in the morning, of going to Freshitt and Tipton to tell Sir James and her uncle all that she wished them to know about Lydgate, whose married loneliness under his trial now presented itself to her with new significance and made her more ardent in readiness to be his champion. She had never felt anything like this triumphant power of indignation in the struggle of her married life, in which there had always been a quickly subduing pang; and she took it as a sign of new strength.

"Dodo, how very bright your eyes are!" said Celia when Sir James was gone out of the room. "And you don't see anything you look at, Arthur or anything. You are going to do something uncomfortable, I know. Is it all about Mr. Lydgate, or has something else happened?" Celia had been used to watch her sister with expectation.

"Yes, dear, a great many things have happened," said Dodo in her full tones.

"I wonder what," said Celia, folding her arms cozily and leaning forward upon them.

"Oh, all the troubles of all people on the face of the earth," said Dorothea, lifting her arms to the back of her head.

"Dear me, Dodo, are you going to have a scheme for them?" said Celia, a little uneasy at this Hamlet-like raving.

But Sir James came in again, ready to accompany Dorothea to the Grange, and she finished her expedition well, not swerving in her resolution until she descended at her own door.

CHAPTER 78

Would it were yesterday and I i' the grave,
With her sweet faith above for monument.

Rosamond and Will stood motionless—they did not know how long—he looking towards the spot where Dorothea had stood, and she looking towards him with doubt. It seemed an endless time to Rosamond, in whose inmost soul there was hardly so much annoyance as gratification from what had just happened. Shallow natures dream of an easy sway over the emotions of others, trusting implicitly in their own petty magic to turn the deepest streams, and confident, by pretty gestures and remarks, of making the thing that is not as though it were. She knew that Will had received a severe blow, but she had been little used to imagining other people's states of mind except as a material cut into shape by her own wishes; and she believed in her own power to soothe or subdue. Even Tertius, that most perverse of men, was always subdued in the long-run; events had been obstinate, but still Rosamond would have said now, as she did before her marriage, that she never gave up what she had set her mind on.

She put out her arm and laid the tips of her fingers on Will's coat sleeve.

"Don't touch me!" he said with an utterance like the cut of a lash, darting from her and changing from pink to white and back again as if his whole frame were tingling with the pain of the sting. He wheeled round to the other side of the room and stood opposite to her, with the tips of his fingers in his pockets and his head thrown back, looking fiercely not at Rosamond but at a point a few inches away from her.

She was keenly offended, but the signs she made of this were such as only Lydgate was used to interpret. She became suddenly quiet and seated herself, untying her hanging bonnet and laying it down with her shawl. Her little hands, which she folded before her, were very cold.

It would have been safer for Will in the first instance to have taken up his hat and gone away, but he had felt no impulse to do this; on the contrary, he had a horrible inclination to stay and shatter Rosamond with his anger. It seemed as impossible to bear the fatality she had drawn down on him without venting his fury as it would be to a panther to bear the javelin-wound without springing and biting. And yet—how could he tell a woman that he was ready to curse her? He was fuming under a repressive law which he was forced to acknowledge: he was dangerously poised, and Rosamond's voice now brought the decisive vibration. In flute-like tones of sarcasm she said, "You can easily go after Mrs. Casaubon and explain your preference."

"Go after her!" he burst out with a sharp edge in his voice. "Do you think she would turn to look at me or value any word I ever uttered to her again at more than a dirty feather? Explain! How can a man explain at the expense of a woman?"

"You can tell her what you please," said Rosamond with more tremor.

"Do you suppose she would like me better for sacrificing you? She is not a woman to be flattered because I made myself despicable—to believe that I must be true to her because I was a dastard to you."

He began to move about with the restlessness of a wild animal that sees prey but cannot reach it. Presently he burst out again, "I had no hope before—not much—of anything better to come. But I had one certainty—that she believed in me. Whatever people had said or done about me, she believed in me. That's gone! She'll never again think me anything but a paltry pretence—too nice to take heaven except upon flattering conditions, and yet selling myself for any devil's change by the sly. She'll think of me as an incarnate insult to her, from the first moment we—"

Will stopped as if he had found himself grasping something that must not be thrown and shattered. He found another vent for his rage by snatching up Rosamond's words again as if they were reptiles to be throttled and flung off.

"Explain! Tell a man to explain how he dropped into hell! Explain my preference! I never had a *preference* for her, any more than I have a preference for breathing. No other woman exists by the side of her. I would rather touch her hand if it were dead than I would touch any other woman's living."

Rosamond, while these poisoned weapons were being hurled at her, was almost losing the sense of her identity and seemed to be waking into some new terrible existence. She had no sense of chill resolute repulsion, of reticent self-justification such as she had known under Lydgate's most stormy displeasure; all her sensibility was turned into a bewildering novelty of pain; she felt a new terrified recoil under a lash never experienced before. What another nature felt in opposition to her own was being burnt and bitten into her consciousness. When Will had ceased to speak she had become an image of sickened misery; her lips were pale, and her eyes had a tearless dismay in them. If it had been Tertius who stood opposite to her, that look of misery would have been a pang to him, and he would have sunk by her side to comfort her with that strong-armed comfort which she had often held very cheap.

Let it be forgiven to Will that he had no such movement of pity. He had felt no bond beforehand to this woman who had spoiled the ideal treasure of his life, and he held himself blameless. He knew that he was cruel, but he had no relenting in him yet.

After he had done speaking, he still moved about, half in absence of mind, and Rosamond sat perfectly still. At length Will, seeming to bethink himself, took up his hat, yet stood some moments irresolute. He had spoken to her in a way that

made a phrase of common politeness difficult to utter; and yet, now that he had come to the point of going away from her without further speech, he shrank from it as a brutality; he felt checked and stultified in his anger. He walked towards the mantelpiece and leaned his arm on it and waited in silence for—he hardly knew what. The vindictive fire was still burning in him, and he could utter no word of retractation; but it was nevertheless in his mind that having come back to this hearth where he had enjoyed a caressing friendship, he had found calamity seated there, he had had suddenly revealed to him a trouble that lay outside the home as well as within it. And what seemed a foreboding was pressing upon him as with slow pincers—that his life might come to be enslaved by this helpless woman who had thrown herself upon him in the dreary sadness of her heart. But he was in gloomy rebellion against the fact that his quick apprehensiveness foreshadowed to him, and when his eyes fell on Rosamond's blighted face it seemed to him that he was the more pitiable of the two, for pain must enter into its glorified life of memory before it can turn into compassion.

And so they remained for many minutes, opposite each other, far apart, in silence, Will's face still possessed by a mute rage and Rosamond's by a mute misery. The poor thing had no force to fling out any passion in return; the terrible collapse of the illusion towards which all her hope had been strained was a stroke which had too thoroughly shaken her: her little world was in ruins, and she felt herself tottering in the midst as a lonely, bewildered consciousness.

Will wished that she would speak and bring some mitigating shadow across his own cruel speech, which seemed to stand staring at them both in mockery of any attempt at revived fellowship. But she said nothing, and at last with a desperate effort over himself, he asked, "Shall I come in and see Lydgate this evening?"

"If you like," Rosamond answered, just audibly.

And then Will went out of the house, Martha never knowing that he had been in.

After he was gone, Rosamond tried to get up from her seat, but fell back fainting. When she came to herself again, she felt too ill to make the exertion of rising to ring the bell, and she remained helpless until the girl, surprised at her long absence, thought for the first time of looking for her in all the downstairs rooms. Rosamond said that she had felt suddenly sick and faint and wanted to be helped upstairs. When there, she threw herself on the bed with her clothes on and lay in apparent torpor as she had done once before on a memorable day of grief.

Lydgate came home earlier than he had expected, about half-past five, and found her there. The perception that she was ill threw every other thought into the background. When he felt her pulse, her eyes rested on him with more persistence than they had done for a long while, as if she felt some content that he was there. He perceived the difference in a moment, and seating himself by her put his arm gently under her, and bending over her said, "My poor Rosamond! Has something agitated you?" Clinging to him she fell into hysterical sobbings and cries, and for the next hour he did nothing but soothe and tend her. He imagined that Dorothea had been to see her and that all this effect on her nervous system, which evidently involved some new turning towards himself, was due to the excitement of the new impressions which that visit had raised.

CHAPTER 79

> Now, I saw in my dream, that just as they had ended their talk, they drew nigh to a very miry slough, that was in the midst of the plain; and they, being heedless, did both fall suddenly into the bog. The name of the slough was Despond.
> —BUNYAN

When Rosamond was quiet and Lydgate had left her, hoping that she might soon sleep under the effect of an anodyne, he went into the drawing-room to fetch a book which he had left there, meaning to spend the evening in his work-room, and he saw on the table Dorothea's letter addressed to him. He had not ventured to ask Rosamond if Mrs. Casaubon had called, but the reading of this letter assured him of the fact, for Dorothea mentioned that it was to be carried by herself.

When Will Ladislaw came in a little later, Lydgate met him with a surprise which made it clear that he had not been told of the earlier visit, and Will could not say, "Did not Mrs. Lydgate tell you that I came this morning?"

"Poor Rosamond is ill," Lydgate added immediately on his greeting.

"Not seriously, I hope," said Will.

"No, only a slight nervous shock, the effect of some agitation. She has been overwrought lately. The truth is, Ladislaw, I am an unlucky devil. We have gone through several rounds of purgatory since you left, and I have lately got on to a worse ledge of it than ever. I suppose you are only just come down—you look rather battered—you have not been long enough in the town to hear anything?"

"I travelled all night and got to the White Hart at eight o'clock this morning. I have been shutting myself up and resting," said Will, feeling himself a sneak, but seeing no alternative to this evasion.

And then he heard Lydgate's account of the troubles which Rosamond had already depicted to him in her way. She had not mentioned the fact of Will's name being connected with the public story, this detail not immediately affecting her, and he now heard it for the first time.

"I thought it better to tell you that your name is mixed up with the disclosures," said Lydgate, who could understand better than most men how Ladislaw might be stung by the revelation. "You will be sure to hear it as soon as you turn out into the town. I suppose it is true that Raffles spoke to you."

"Yes," said Will sardonically. "I shall be fortunate if gossip does not make me the most disreputable person in the whole affair. I should think the latest version must be that I plotted with Raffles to murder Bulstrode and ran away from Middlemarch for the purpose."

He was thinking, "Here is a new ring in the sound of my name to recommend it in her hearing; however—what does it signify now?"

But he said nothing of Bulstrode's offer to him. Will was very open and careless about his personal affairs, but it was among the more exquisite touches in nature's modelling of him that he had a delicate generosity which warned him into reticence here. He shrank from saying that he had rejected Bulstrode's money in the moment when he was learning that it was Lydgate's misfortune to have accepted it.

Lydgate too was reticent in the midst of his confidence. He made no allusion to Rosamond's feeling under their trouble, and of Dorothea he only said, "Mrs. Casaubon has been the one person to come forward and say that she had no belief in any of the suspicions against me." Observing a change in Will's face, he avoided any further mention of her, feeling himself too ignorant of their relation to each other not to fear that his words might have some hidden, painful bearing on it. And it occurred to him that Dorothea was the real cause of the present visit to Middlemarch.

The two men were pitying each other, but it was only Will who guessed the extent of his companion's trouble. When Lydgate spoke with desperate resignation of going to settle in London and said with a faint smile, "We shall have you again, old fellow," Will felt inexpressibly mournful and said nothing. Rosamond had that morning entreated him to urge this step on Lydgate; and it seemed to him as if he were beholding in a magic panorama a future where he himself was sliding into that pleasureless yielding to the small solicitations of circumstance, which is a commoner history of perdition than any single momentous bargain.

We are on a perilous margin when we begin to look passively at our future selves and see our own figures led with dull consent into insipid misdoing and shabby achievement. Poor Lydgate was inwardly groaning on that margin, and Will was arriving at it. It seemed to him this evening as if the cruelty of his outburst to Rosamond had made an obligation for him, and he dreaded the obligation; he dreaded Lydgate's unsuspecting goodwill; he dreaded his own distaste for his spoiled life, which would leave him in motiveless levity.

CHAPTER 80

Stern lawgiver! yet thou dost wear
The Godhead's most benignant grace;
Nor know we anything so fair
As is the smile upon thy face;
Flowers laugh before thee on their beds,
And fragrance in thy footing treads;
Thou dost preserve the Stars from wrong;
And the most ancient Heavens, through thee, are fresh and strong.
—WORDSWORTH: *Ode to Duty*

When Dorothea had seen Mr. Farebrother in the morning, she had promised to go and dine at the parsonage on her return from Freshitt. There was a frequent interchange of visits between her and the Farebrother family, which enabled her to say that she was not at all lonely at the manor and to resist for the present the severe prescription of a lady companion. When she reached home and remembered her engagement, she was glad of it; and finding that she had still an hour before she could dress for dinner, she walked straight to the schoolhouse and entered into a conversation with the master and mistress about the new bell, giving eager attention to their small details and repetitions and getting up a dramatic sense that her life was very busy. She paused on her way back to talk to old Master Bunney, who was putting in some garden-seeds, and discoursed wisely with that rural sage about the crops that would make the most return on a perch of ground, and the result of sixty years' experience as to soils, namely, that if your soil was pretty mellow it would do, but if there came wet, wet, wet to make it all of a mummy, why then—

Finding that the social spirit had beguiled her into being rather late, she dressed hastily and went over to the parsonage rather earlier than was necessary. That house was never dull, Mr. Farebrother, like another White of Selborne, having continually something new to tell of his inarticulate guests and *protégés*, whom he was teaching the boys not to torment; and he had just set up a pair of beautiful goats to be pets of the village in general and to walk at large as sacred animals. The evening went by cheerfully till after tea, Dorothea talking more than usual and dilating with Mr. Farebrother on the possible histories of creatures that converse compendiously with their antennae, and for aught we know may hold reformed parliaments, when suddenly some inarticulate little sounds were heard which called everybody's attention.

"Henrietta Noble," said Mrs. Farebrother, seeing her small sister moving about the furniture-legs distressfully, "what is the matter?"

"I have lost my tortoise-shell lozenge-box. I fear the kitten has rolled it away," said the tiny old lady, involuntarily continuing her beaver-like notes.

"Is it a great treasure, Aunt?" said Mr. Farebrother, putting up his glasses and looking at the carpet.

"Mr. Ladislaw gave it me," said Miss Noble. "A German box—very pretty; but if it falls it always spins away as far as it can."

"Oh, if it is Ladislaw's present," said Mr. Farebrother in a deep tone of comprehension, getting up and hunting. The box was found at last under a chiffonier, and Miss Noble grasped it with delight, saying, "It was under a fender the last time."

"That is an affair of the heart with my aunt," said Mr. Farebrother, smiling at Dorothea as he reseated himself.

"If Henrietta Noble forms an attachment to anyone, Mrs. Casaubon," said his mother emphatically, "she is like a dog; she would take their shoes for a pillow and sleep the better."

"Mr. Ladislaw's shoes, I would," said Henrietta Noble.

Dorothea made an attempt at smiling in return. She was surprised and annoyed to find that her heart was palpitating violently and that it was quite useless to try after a recovery of her former animation. Alarmed at herself, fearing some further betrayal of a change so marked in its occasion, she rose and said in a low voice with undisguised anxiety, "I must go; I have overtired myself."

Mr. Farebrother, quick in perception, rose and said, "It is true; you must have half-exhausted yourself in talking about Lydgate. That sort of work tells upon one after the excitement is over."

He gave her his arm back to the manor, but Dorothea did not attempt to speak, even when he said good-night.

The limit of resistance was reached, and she had sunk back helpless within the clutch of inescapable anguish. Dismissing Tantripp with a few faint words, she locked her door, and turning away from it towards the vacant room, she pressed her hands hard on the top of her head and moaned out, "Oh, I did love him!"

Then came the hour in which the waves of suffering shook her too thoroughly to leave any power of thought. She could only cry in loud whispers, between her sobs, after her lost belief which she had planted and kept alive from a very little seed since the days in Rome—after her lost joy of clinging with silent love and faith to one who, misprized by others, was worthy in her thought—after her lost woman's pride of reigning in his memory—after her sweet, dim perspective of hope, that along some pathway they should meet with unchanged recognition and take up the backward years as a yesterday.

In that hour she repeated what the merciful eyes of solitude have looked on for ages in the spiritual struggles of man; she besought hardness and coldness and aching weariness to bring her relief from the mysterious incorporeal might of her anguish; she lay on the bare floor and let the night grow cold around her, while her grand woman's frame was shaken by

sobs as if she had been a despairing child.

There were two images—two living forms that tore her heart in two, as if it had been the heart of a mother who seems to see her child divided by the sword and presses one bleeding half to her breast while her gaze goes forth in agony towards the half which is carried away by the lying woman that has never known the mother's pang.

Here, with the nearness of an answering smile, here within the vibrating bond of mutual speech, was the bright creature whom she had trusted—who had come to her like the spirit of morning visiting the dim vault where she sat as the bride of a worn-out life; and now, with a full consciousness which had never awakened before, she stretched out her arms towards him and cried with bitter cries that their nearness was a parting vision; she discovered her passion to herself in the unshrinking utterance of despair.

And there, aloof, yet persistently with her, moving wherever she moved, was the Will Ladislaw who was a changed belief exhausted of hope, a detected illusion—no, a living man towards whom there could not yet struggle any wail of regretful pity from the midst of scorn and indignation and jealous, offended pride. The fire of Dorothea's anger was not easily spent, and it flamed out in fitful returns of spurning reproach. Why had he come obtruding his life into hers, hers that might have been whole enough without him? Why had he brought his cheap regard and his lip-born words to her who had nothing paltry to give in exchange? He knew that he was deluding her—wished, in the very moment of farewell, to make her believe that he gave her the whole price of her heart, and knew that he had spent it half before. Why had he not stayed among the crowd of whom she asked nothing, but only prayed that they might be less contemptible?

But she lost energy at last even for her loud-whispered cries and moans; she subsided into helpless sobs, and on the cold floor she sobbed herself to sleep.

In the chill hours of the morning twilight, when all was dim around her, she awoke, not with any amazed wondering where she was or what had happened, but with the clearest consciousness that she was looking into the eyes of sorrow. She rose and wrapped warm things around her and seated herself in a great chair where she had often watched before. She was vigorous enough to have borne that hard night without feeling ill in body beyond some aching and fatigue; but she had waked to a new condition: she felt as if her soul had been liberated from its terrible conflict; she was no longer wrestling with her grief, but could sit down with it as a lasting companion and make it a sharer in her thoughts. For now the thoughts came thickly. It was not in Dorothea's nature, for longer than the duration of a paroxysm, to sit in the narrow cell of her calamity, in the besotted misery of a consciousness that only sees another's lot as an accident of its own.

She began now to live through that yesterday morning deliberately again, forcing herself to dwell on every detail and its possible meaning. Was she alone in that scene? Was it her event only? She forced herself to think of it as bound up with another woman's life—a woman towards whom she had set out with a longing to carry some clearness and comfort into her beclouded youth. In her first outleap of jealous indignation and disgust, when quitting the hateful room, she had flung away all the mercy with which she had undertaken that visit. She had enveloped both Will and Rosamond in her burning scorn, and it seemed to her as if Rosamond were burned out of her sight forever. But that base prompting which makes a woman more cruel to a rival than to a faithless lover could have no strength of recurrence in Dorothea when the dominant spirit of justice within her had once overcome the tumult and had once shown her the truer measure of things. All the active thought with which she had before been representing to herself the trials of Lydgate's lot, and this young marriage union which, like her own, seemed to have its hidden as well as evident troubles—all this vivid sympathetic experience returned to her now as a power; it asserted itself as acquired knowledge asserts itself and will not let us see as we saw in the day of our ignorance. She said to her own irremediable grief that it should make her more helpful instead of driving her back from effort.

And what sort of crisis might not this be in three lives whose contact with hers laid an obligation on her as if they had been suppliants bearing the sacred branch? The objects of her rescue were not to be sought out by her fancy; they were chosen for her. She yearned towards the perfect Right, that it might make a throne within her and rule her errant will. "What should I do—how should I act now, this very day, if I could clutch my own pain and compel it to silence and think of those three?"

It had taken long for her to come to that question, and there was light piercing into the room. She opened her curtains and looked out towards the bit of road that lay in view, with fields beyond, outside the entrance-gates. On the road there was a man with a bundle on his back and a woman carrying her baby; in the field she could see figures moving, perhaps the shepherd with his dog. Far off in the bending sky was the pearly light, and she felt the largeness of the world and the manifold wakings of men to labour and endurance. She was a part of that involuntary, palpitating life and could neither look out on it from her luxurious shelter as a mere spectator nor hide her eyes in selfish complaining.

What she would resolve to do that day did not yet seem quite clear, but something that she could achieve stirred her as with an approaching murmur which would soon gather distinctness. She took off the clothes which seemed to have some of the weariness of a hard watching in them and began to make her toilet. Presently she rang for Tantripp, who came in her dressing-gown.

"Why, Madam, you've never been in bed this blessed night," burst out Tantripp, looking first at the bed and then at Dorothea's face, which in spite of bathing had the pale cheeks and pink eyelids of a *mater dolorosa*. "You'll kill yourself, you *will*. Anybody might think now you had a right to give yourself a little comfort."

"Don't be alarmed, Tantripp," said Dorothea, smiling. "I have slept; I am not ill. I shall be glad of a cup of coffee as soon as possible. And I want you to bring me my new dress, and most likely I shall want my new bonnet today."

"They've lain there a month and more ready for you, Madam, and most thankful I shall be to see you with a couple o' pounds' worth less of crape," said Tantripp, stooping to light the fire. "There's a reason in mourning, as I've always said; and three folds at the bottom of your skirt and a plain quilling in your bonnet—and if ever anybody looked like an angel, it's you in a net quilling—is what's consistent for a second year. At least, that's *my* thinking," ended Tantripp, looking anxiously at the fire; "and if anybody was to marry me flattering himself I should wear those hijeous weepers two years for him, he'd be deceived by his own vanity, that's all."

"The fire will do, my good Tan," said Dorothea, speaking as she used to do in the old Lausanne days, only with a very

low voice; “get me the coffee.”

She folded herself in the large chair and leaned her head against it in fatigued quiescence while Tantripp went away wondering at this strange contrariness in her young mistress—that just the morning when she had more of a widow’s face than ever she should have asked for her lighter mourning, which she had waived before. Tantripp would never have found the clue to this mystery. Dorothea wished to acknowledge that she had not the less an active life before her because she had buried a private joy; and the tradition that fresh garments belonged to all initiation, haunting her mind, made her grasp after even that slight outward help towards calm resolve. For the resolve was not easy.

Nevertheless at eleven o’clock she was walking towards Middlemarch, having made up her mind that she would make as quietly and unnoticeably as possible her second attempt to see and save Rosamond.

CHAPTER 81

Du Erde warst auch diese Nacht beständig,
Und athmest neu erquickt zu meinen Füssen,
Beginnest schon mit Lust mich zu umgeben,
Du regst und rührst ein kräftiges Beschliessen
Zum hochsien Dasein immerfort zu streben.

—*Faust*: 2R THEIL

When Dorothea was again at Lydgate's door speaking to Martha, he was in the room close by with the door ajar, preparing to go out. He heard her voice and immediately came to her.

"Do you think that Mrs. Lydgate can receive me this morning?" she said, having reflected that it would be better to leave out all allusion to her previous visit.

"I have no doubt she will," said Lydgate, suppressing his thought about Dorothea's looks, which were as much changed as Rosamond's, "if you will be kind enough to come in and let me tell her that you are here. She has not been very well since you were here yesterday, but she is better this morning, and I think it is very likely that she will be cheered by seeing you again."

It was plain that Lydgate, as Dorothea had expected, knew nothing about the circumstances of her yesterday's visit; nay, he appeared to imagine that she had carried it out according to her intention. She had prepared a little note asking Rosamond to see her, which she would have given to the servant if he had not been in the way, but now she was in much anxiety as to the result of his announcement.

After leading her into the drawing-room, he paused to take a letter from his pocket and put it into her hands, saying, "I wrote this last night and was going to carry it to Lowick in my ride. When one is grateful for something too good for common thanks, writing is less unsatisfactory than speech—one does not at least *hear* how inadequate the words are."

Dorothea's face brightened. "It is I who have most to thank for, since you have let me take that place. You *have* consented?" she said, suddenly doubting.

"Yes, the cheque is going to Bulstrode today."

He said no more, but went upstairs to Rosamond, who had but lately finished dressing herself and sat languidly wondering what she should do next, her habitual industry in small things, even in the days of her sadness, prompting her to begin some kind of occupation, which she dragged through slowly or paused in from lack of interest. She looked ill but had recovered her usual quietude of manner, and Lydgate had feared to disturb her by any questions. He had told her of Dorothea's letter containing the cheque, and afterwards he had said, "Ladislaw is come, Rosy; he sat with me last night; I dare say he will be here again today. I thought he looked rather battered and depressed." And Rosamond had made no reply.

Now, when he came up, he said to her very gently, "Rosy, dear, Mrs. Casaubon is come to see you again; you would like to see her, would you not?" That she coloured and gave rather a startled movement did not surprise him after the agitation produced by the interview yesterday—a beneficent agitation, he thought, since it seemed to have made her turn to him again.

Rosamond dared not say no. She dared not with a tone of her voice touch the facts of yesterday. Why had Mrs. Casaubon come again? The answer was a blank which Rosamond could only fill up with dread, for Will Ladislaw's lacerating words had made every thought of Dorothea a fresh smart to her. Nevertheless, in her new humiliating uncertainty she dared do nothing but comply. She did not say yes, but she rose and let Lydgate put a light shawl over her shoulders, while he said, "I am going out immediately." Then something crossed her mind which prompted her to say, "Pray tell Martha not to bring anyone else into the drawing-room." And Lydgate assented, thinking that he fully understood this wish. He led her down to the drawing-room door and then turned away, observing to himself that he was rather a blundering husband to be dependent for his wife's trust in him on the influence of another woman.

Rosamond, wrapping her soft shawl around her as she walked towards Dorothea, was inwardly wrapping her soul in cold reserve. Had Mrs. Casaubon come to say anything to her about Will? If so, it was a liberty that Rosamond resented, and she prepared herself to meet every word with polite impassibility. Will had bruised her pride too sorely for her to feel any compunction towards him and Dorothea: her own injury seemed much the greater. Dorothea was not only the "preferred" woman, but had also a formidable advantage in being Lydgate's benefactor; and to poor Rosamond's pained, confused vision it seemed that this Mrs. Casaubon—this woman who predominated in all things concerning her—must have come now with the sense of having the advantage and with animosity prompting her to use it. Indeed, not Rosamond only, but anyone else, knowing the outer facts of the case and not the simple inspiration on which Dorothea acted, might well have wondered why she came.

Looking like the lovely ghost of herself, her graceful slimness wrapped in her soft white shawl, the rounded infantine mouth and cheek inevitably suggesting mildness and innocence, Rosamond paused at three yards' distance from her visitor and bowed. But Dorothea, who had taken off her gloves, from an impulse which she could never resist when she wanted a sense of freedom, came forward, and with her face full of a sad yet sweet openness put out her hand. Rosamond could not

avoid meeting her glance, could not avoid putting her small hand into Dorothea's, which clasped it with gentle motherliness; and immediately a doubt of her own prepossessions began to stir within her. Rosamond's eye was quick for faces; she saw that Mrs. Casaubon's face looked pale and changed since yesterday, yet gentle and like the firm softness of her hand. But Dorothea had counted a little too much on her own strength; the clearness and intensity of her mental action this morning were the continuance of a nervous exaltation which made her frame as dangerously responsive as a bit of finest Venetian crystal; and in looking at Rosamond, she suddenly found her heart swelling, and was unable to speak—all her effort was required to keep back tears. She succeeded in that, and the emotion only passed over her face like the spirit of a sob; but it added to Rosamond's impression that Mrs. Casaubon's state of mind must be something quite different from what she had imagined.

So they sat down without a word of preface on the two chairs that happened to be nearest and happened also to be close together, though Rosamond's notion when she first bowed was that she should stay a long way off from Mrs. Casaubon. But she ceased thinking how anything would turn out, merely wondering what would come. And Dorothea began to speak quite simply, gathering firmness as she went on.

"I had an errand yesterday which I did not finish; that is why I am here again so soon. You will not think me too troublesome when I tell you that I came to talk to you about the injustice that has been shown towards Mr. Lydgate. It will cheer you—will it not?—to know a great deal about him that he may not like to speak about himself just because it is in his own vindication and to his own honour. You will like to know that your husband has warm friends, who have not left off believing in his high character? You will let me speak of this without thinking that I take a liberty?"

The cordial, pleading tones which seemed to flow with generous heedlessness above all the facts which had filled Rosamond's mind as grounds of obstruction and hatred between her and this woman came as soothingly as a warm stream over her shrinking fears. Of course Mrs. Casaubon had the facts in her mind, but she was not going to speak of anything connected with them. That relief was too great for Rosamond to feel much else at the moment. She answered prettily, in the new ease of her soul, "I know you have been very good. I shall like to hear anything you will say to me about Tertius."

"The day before yesterday," said Dorothea, "when I had asked him to come to Lowick to give me his opinion on the affairs of the hospital, he told me everything about his conduct and feelings in this sad event which has made ignorant people cast suspicions on him. The reason he told me was because I was very bold and asked him. I believed that he had never acted dishonourably, and I begged him to tell me the history. He confessed to me that he had never told it before, not even to you, because he had a great dislike to say, 'I was not wrong,' as if that were proof, when there are guilty people who will say so. The truth is, he knew nothing of this man Raffles, or that there were any bad secrets about him; and he thought that Mr. Bulstrode offered him the money because he repented, out of kindness, of having refused it before. All his anxiety about his patient was to treat him rightly, and he was a little uncomfortable that the case did not end as he had expected; but he thought then and still thinks that there may have been no wrong in it on anyone's part. And I have told Mr. Farebrother, and Mr. Brooke, and Sir James Chettam; they all believe in your husband. That will cheer you, will it not? That will give you courage?"

Dorothea's face had become animated, and as it beamed on Rosamond very close to her, she felt something like bashful timidity before a superior, in the presence of this self-forgetful ardour. She said with blushing embarrassment, "Thank you; you are very kind."

"And he felt that he had been so wrong not to pour out everything about this to you. But you will forgive him. It was because he feels so much more about your happiness than anything else—he feels his life bound into one with yours, and it hurts him more than anything that his misfortunes must hurt you. He could speak to me because I am an indifferent person. And then I asked him if I might come to see you because I felt so much for his trouble and yours. That is why I came yesterday, and why I am come today. Trouble is so hard to bear, is it not? How can we live and think that anyone has trouble—piercing trouble—and we could help them, and never try?"

Dorothea, completely swayed by the feeling that she was uttering, forgot everything but that she was speaking from out the heart of her own trial to Rosamond's. The emotion had wrought itself more and more into her utterance till the tones might have gone to one's very marrow, like a low cry from some suffering creature in the darkness. And she had unconsciously laid her hand again on the little hand that she had pressed before.

Rosamond, with an overmastering pang, as if a wound within her had been probed, burst into hysterical crying as she had done the day before when she clung to her husband. Poor Dorothea was feeling a great wave of her own sorrow returning over her—her thought being drawn to the possible share that Will Ladislaw might have in Rosamond's mental tumult. She was beginning to fear that she should not be able to suppress herself enough to the end of this meeting, and while her hand was still resting on Rosamond's lap, though the hand underneath it was withdrawn, she was struggling against her own rising sobs. She tried to master herself with the thought that this might be a turning-point in three lives—not in her own; no, there the irrevocable had happened, but—in those three lives which were touching hers with the solemn neighbourhood of danger and distress. The fragile creature who was crying close to her—there might still be time to rescue her from the misery of false, incompatible bonds; and this moment was unlike any other; she and Rosamond could never be together again with the same thrilling consciousness of yesterday within them both. She felt the relation between them to be peculiar enough to give her a peculiar influence, though she had no conception that the way in which her own feelings were involved was fully known to Mrs. Lydgate.

It was a newer crisis in Rosamond's experience than even Dorothea could imagine; she was under the first great shock that had shattered her dream-world in which she had been easily confident of herself and critical of others; and this strange, unexpected manifestation of feeling in a woman whom she had approached with a shrinking aversion and dread, as one who must necessarily have a jealous hatred towards her, made her soul totter all the more with a sense that she had been walking in an unknown world which had just broken in upon her.

When Rosamond's convulsed throat was subsiding into calm, and she withdrew the handkerchief with which she had been hiding her face, her eyes met Dorothea's as helplessly as if they had been blue flowers. What was the use of thinking about behaviour after this crying? And Dorothea looked almost as childish, with the neglected trace of a silent tear. Pride

was broken down between these two.

"We were talking about your husband," Dorothea said with some timidity. "I thought his looks were sadly changed with suffering the other day. I had not seen him for many weeks before. He said he had been feeling very lonely in his trial, but I think he would have borne it all better if he had been able to be quite open with you."

"Tertius is so angry and impatient if I say anything," said Rosamond, imagining that he had been complaining of her to Dorothea. "He ought not to wonder that I object to speak to him on painful subjects."

"It was himself he blamed for not speaking," said Dorothea. "What he said of you was that he could not be happy in doing anything which made you unhappy—that his marriage was of course a bond which must affect his choice about everything; and for that reason he refused my proposal that he should keep his position at the hospital, because that would bind him to stay in Middlemarch, and he would not undertake to do anything which would be painful to you. He could say that to me because he knows that I had much trial in my marriage, from my husband's illness, which hindered his plans and saddened him; and he knows that I have felt how hard it is to walk always in fear of hurting another who is tied to us."

Dorothea waited a little; she had discerned a faint pleasure stealing over Rosamond's face. But there was no answer, and she went on with a gathering tremor, "Marriage is so unlike everything else. There is something even awful in the nearness it brings. Even if we loved someone else better than—than those we were married to, it would be no use." Poor Dorothea, in her palpitating anxiety, could only seize her language brokenly—"I mean, marriage drinks up all our power of giving or getting any blessedness in that sort of love. I know it may be very dear, but it murders our marriage, and then the marriage stays with us like a murder, and everything else is gone. And then our husband—if he loved and trusted us, and we have not helped him, but made a curse in his life—"

Her voice had sunk very low; there was a dread upon her of presuming too far and of speaking as if she herself were perfection addressing error. She was too much preoccupied with her own anxiety to be aware that Rosamond was trembling too; and filled with the need to express pitying fellowship rather than rebuke, she put her hands on Rosamond's and said with more agitated rapidity, "I know, I know that the feeling may be very dear—it has taken hold of us unawares—it is so hard, it may seem like death to part with it—and we are weak—I am weak—"

The waves of her own sorrow, from out of which she was struggling to save another, rushed over Dorothea with conquering force. She stopped in speechless agitation, not crying, but feeling as if she were being inwardly grappled. Her face had become of a deathlier paleness, her lips trembled, and she pressed her hands helplessly on the hands that lay under them.

Rosamond, taken hold of by an emotion stronger than her own—hurried along in a new movement which gave all things some new, awful, undefined aspect—could find no words, but involuntarily she put her lips to Dorothea's forehead, which was very near her, and then for a minute the two women clasped each other as if they had been in a shipwreck.

"You are thinking what is not true," said Rosamond in an eager half-whisper, while she was still feeling Dorothea's arms round her—urged by a mysterious necessity to free herself from something that oppressed her as if it were blood-guiltiness.

They moved apart, looking at each other.

"When you came in yesterday—it was not as you thought," said Rosamond in the same tone.

There was a movement of surprised attention in Dorothea. She expected a vindication of Rosamond herself.

"He was telling me how he loved another woman, that I might know he could never love me," said Rosamond, getting more and more hurried as she went on. "And now I think he hates me because—because you mistook him yesterday. He says it is through me that you will think ill of him—think that he is a false person. But it shall not be through me. He has never had any love for me—I know he has not—he has always thought slightly of me. He said yesterday that no other woman existed for him beside you. The blame of what happened is entirely mine. He said he could never explain to you—because of me. He said you could never think well of him again. But now I have told you, and he cannot reproach me any more."

Rosamond had delivered her soul under impulses which she had not known before. She had begun her confession under the subduing influence of Dorothea's emotion; and as she went on she had gathered the sense that she was repelling Will's reproaches, which were still like a knife-wound within her.

The revulsion of feeling in Dorothea was too strong to be called joy. It was a tumult in which the terrible strain of the night and morning made a resistant pain. She could only perceive that this would be joy when she had recovered her power of feeling it. Her immediate consciousness was one of immense sympathy without check; she cared for Rosamond without struggle now, and responded earnestly to her last words, "No, he cannot reproach you any more."

With her usual tendency to overestimate the good in others, she felt a great outgoing of her heart towards Rosamond for the generous effort which had redeemed her from suffering, not counting that the effort was a reflex of her own energy.

After they had been silent a little she said, "You are not sorry that I came this morning?"

"No, you have been very good to me," said Rosamond. "I did not think that you would be so good. I was very unhappy. I am not happy now. Everything is so sad."

"But better days will come. Your husband will be rightly valued. And he depends on you for comfort. He loves you best. The worst loss would be to lose that—and you have not lost it," said Dorothea.

She tried to thrust away the too overpowering thought of her own relief lest she should fail to win some sign that Rosamond's affection was yearning back towards her husband.

"Tertius did not find fault with me, then?" said Rosamond, understanding now that Lydgate might have said anything to Mrs. Casaubon, and that she certainly was different from other women. Perhaps there was a faint taste of jealousy in the question. A smile began to play over Dorothea's face as she said, "No, indeed! How could you imagine it?" But here the door opened, and Lydgate entered.

"I am come back in my quality of doctor," he said. "After I went away, I was haunted by two pale faces: Mrs. Casaubon looked as much in need of care as you, Rosy. And I thought that I had not done my duty in leaving you together; so when I had been to Coleman's I came home again. I noticed that you were walking, Mrs. Casaubon, and the sky has changed—I think we may have rain. May I send someone to order your carriage to come for you?"

“Oh no! I am strong; I need the walk,” said Dorothea, rising with animation in her face. “Mrs. Lydgate and I have chatted a great deal, and it is time for me to go. I have always been accused of being immoderate and saying too much.”

She put out her hand to Rosamond, and they said an earnest, quiet good-bye without kiss or other show of effusion; there had been between them too much serious emotion for them to use the signs of it superficially.

As Lydgate took her to the door she said nothing of Rosamond, but told him of Mr. Farebrother and the other friends who had listened with belief to his story.

When he came back to Rosamond, she had already thrown herself on the sofa in resigned fatigue.

“Well, Rosy,” he said, standing over her and touching her hair, “what do you think of Mrs. Casaubon now you have seen so much of her?”

“I think she must be better than anyone,” said Rosamond, “and she is very beautiful. If you go to talk to her so often, you will be more discontented with me than ever!”

Lydgate laughed at the “so often.” “But has she made you any less discontented with me?”

“I think she has,” said Rosamond, looking up in his face. “How heavy your eyes are, Tertius—and do push your hair back.” He lifted up his large white hand to obey her and felt thankful for this little mark of interest in him. Poor Rosamond’s vagrant fancy had come back terribly scourged—meek enough to nestle under the old despised shelter. And the shelter was still there; Lydgate had accepted his narrowed lot with sad resignation. He had chosen this fragile creature and had taken the burden of her life upon his arms. He must walk as he could, carrying that burden pitifully.

CHAPTER 82

My grief lies onward and my joy behind.

—SHAKESPEARE: *Sonnets*

Exiles notoriously feed much on hopes and are unlikely to stay in banishment unless they are obliged. When Will Ladislaw exiled himself from Middlemarch he had placed no stronger obstacle to his return than his own resolve, which was by no means an iron barrier, but simply a state of mind liable to melt into a minuet with other states of mind and to find itself bowing, smiling, and giving place with polite facility. As the months went on, it had seemed more and more difficult to him to say why he should not run down to Middlemarch—merely for the sake of hearing something about Dorothea; and if on such a flying visit he should chance by some strange coincidence to meet with her, there was no reason for him to be ashamed of having taken an innocent journey which he had beforehand supposed that he should not take. Since he was hopelessly divided from her, he might surely venture into her neighbourhood; and as to the suspicious friends who kept a dragon watch over her, their opinions seemed less and less important with time and change of air.

And there had come a reason quite irrespective of Dorothea which seemed to make a journey to Middlemarch a sort of philanthropic duty. Will had given a disinterested attention to an intended settlement on a new plan in the Far West, and the need for funds in order to carry out a good design had set him on debating with himself whether it would not be a laudable use to make of his claim on Bulstrode to urge the application of that money which had been offered to himself as a means of carrying out a scheme likely to be largely beneficial. The question seemed a very dubious one to Will, and his repugnance to again entering into any relation with the banker might have made him dismiss it quickly if there had not arisen in his imagination the probability that his judgement might be more safely determined by a visit to Middlemarch.

That was the object which Will stated to himself as a reason for coming down. He had meant to confide in Lydgate and discuss the money question with him, and he had meant to amuse himself for the few evenings of his stay by having a great deal of music and badinage with fair Rosamond, without neglecting his friends at Lowick parsonage—if the parsonage was close to the manor, that was no fault of his. He had neglected the Farebrothers before his departure, from a proud resistance to the possible accusation of indirectly seeking interviews with Dorothea; but hunger tames us, and Will had become very hungry for the vision of a certain form and the sound of a certain voice. Nothing had done instead—not the opera, or the converse of zealous politicians, or the flattering reception (in dim corners) of his new hand in leading articles.

Thus he had come down, foreseeing with confidence how almost everything would be in his familiar little world, fearing, indeed, that there would be no surprises in his visit. But he had found that humdrum world in a terribly dynamic condition, in which even badinage and lyrism had turned explosive; and the first day of this visit had become the most fatal epoch of his life. The next morning he felt so harassed with the nightmare of consequences—he dreaded so much the immediate issues before him—that seeing while he breakfasted the arrival of the Riverston coach, he went out hurriedly and took his place on it that he might be relieved, at least for a day, from the necessity of doing or saying anything in Middlemarch. Will Ladislaw was in one of those tangled crises which are commoner in experience than one might imagine, from the shallow absoluteness of men's judgements. He had found Lydgate, for whom he had the sincerest respect, under circumstances which claimed his thorough and frankly declared sympathy; and the reason why, in spite of that claim, it would have been better for Will to have avoided all further intimacy, or even contact, with Lydgate was precisely of the kind to make such a course appear impossible. To a creature of Will's susceptible temperament—without any neutral region of indifference in his nature, ready to turn everything that befell him into the collisions of a passionate drama—the revelation that Rosamond had made her happiness in any way dependent on him was a difficulty which his outburst of rage towards her had immeasurably increased for him. He hated his own cruelty, and yet he dreaded to show the fulness of his relenting: he must go to her again; the friendship could not be put to a sudden end, and her unhappiness was a power which he dreaded. And all the while there was no more foretaste of enjoyment in the life before him than if his limbs had been lopped off and he was making his fresh start on crutches. In the night he had debated whether he should not get on the coach, not for Riverston, but for London, leaving a note to Lydgate which would give a makeshift reason for his retreat. But there were strong cords pulling him back from that abrupt departure: the blight on his happiness in thinking of Dorothea, the crushing of that chief hope which had remained in spite of the acknowledged necessity for renunciation, was too fresh a misery for him to resign himself to it and go straightway into a distance which was also despair.

Thus he did nothing more decided than taking the Riverston coach. He came back again by it while it was still daylight, having made up his mind that he must go to Lydgate's that evening. The Rubicon, we know, was a very insignificant stream to look at; its significance lay entirely in certain invisible conditions. Will felt as if he were forced to cross his small boundary ditch, and what he saw beyond it was not empire but discontented subjection.

But it is given to us sometimes even in our everyday life to witness the saving influence of a noble nature, the divine efficacy of rescue that may lie in a self-subduing act of fellowship. If Dorothea, after her night's anguish, had not taken that walk to Rosamond—why, she perhaps would have been a woman who gained a higher character for discretion, but it would certainly not have been as well for those three who were on one hearth in Lydgate's house at half-past seven that evening.

Rosamond had been prepared for Will's visit, and she received him with a languid coldness which Lydgate accounted for by her nervous exhaustion, of which he could not suppose that it had any relation to Will. And when she sat in silence bending over a bit of work, he innocently apologized for her in an indirect way by begging her to lean backward and rest. Will was miserable in the necessity for playing the part of a friend who was making his first appearance and greeting to Rosamond, while his thoughts were busy about her feeling since that scene of yesterday, which seemed still inexorably to enclose them both, like the painful vision of a double madness. It happened that nothing called Lydgate out of the room; but when Rosamond poured out the tea and Will came near to fetch it, she placed a tiny bit of folded paper in his saucer. He saw it and secured it quickly, but as he went back to his inn he had no eagerness to unfold the paper. What Rosamond had written to him would probably deepen the painful impressions of the evening. Still, he opened and read it by his bed-candle. There were only these few words in her neatly flowing hand, "I have told Mrs. Casaubon. She is not under any mistake about you. I told her because she came to see me and was very kind. You will have nothing to reproach me with now. I shall not have made any difference to you."

The effect of these words was not quite all gladness. As Will dwelt on them with excited imagination, he felt his cheeks and ears burning at the thought of what had occurred between Dorothea and Rosamond—at the uncertainty how far Dorothea might still feel her dignity wounded in having an explanation of his conduct offered to her. There might still remain in her mind a changed association with him which made an irremediable difference, a lasting flaw. With active fancy he wrought himself into a state of doubt little more easy than that of the man who has escaped from wreck by night and stands on unknown ground in the darkness. Until that wretched yesterday, except the moment of vexation long ago in the very same room and in the very same presence, all their vision, all their thought of each other, had been as in a world apart, where the sunshine fell on tall white lilies, where no evil lurked, and no other soul entered. But now—would Dorothea meet him in that world again?

CHAPTER 83

And now good-morrow to our waking souls
Which watch not one another out of fear;
For love all love of other sights controls,
And makes one little room, an everywhere.

—DR. DONNE

On the second morning after Dorothea's visit to Rosamond, she had had two nights of sound sleep and had not only lost all traces of fatigue, but felt as if she had a great deal of superfluous strength—that is to say, more strength than she could manage to concentrate on any occupation. The day before, she had taken long walks outside the grounds and had paid two visits to the parsonage; but she never in her life told anyone the reason why she spent her time in that fruitless manner, and this morning she was rather angry with herself for her childish restlessness. Today was to be spent quite differently. What was there to be done in the village? O dear! Nothing. Everybody was well and had flannel; nobody's pig had died; and it was Saturday morning, when there was a general scrubbing of floors and door-stones, and when it was useless to go into the school. But there were various subjects that Dorothea was trying to get clear upon, and she resolved to throw herself energetically into the gravest of all. She sat down in the library before her particular little heap of books on political economy and kindred matters, out of which she was trying to get light as to the best way of spending money so as not to injure one's neighbours or—what comes to the same thing—so as to do them the most good. Here was a weighty subject which, if she could but lay hold of it, would certainly keep her mind steady. Unhappily her mind slipped off it for a whole hour; and at the end she found herself reading sentences twice over with an intense consciousness of many things, but not of any one thing contained in the text. This was hopeless. Should she order the carriage and drive to Tipton? No; for some reason or other she preferred staying at Lowick. But her vagrant mind must be reduced to order; there was an art in self-discipline, and she walked round and round the brown library considering by what sort of manoeuvre she could arrest her wandering thoughts. Perhaps a mere task was the best means—something to which she must go doggedly. Was there not the geography of Asia Minor, in which her slackness had often been rebuked by Mr. Casaubon? She went to the cabinet of maps and unrolled one; this morning she might make herself finally sure that Paphlogonia was not on the Levantine coast and fix her total darkness about the Chalybes firmly on the shores of the Euxine. A map was a fine thing to study when you were disposed to think of something else, being made up of names that would turn into a chime if you went back upon them. Dorothea set earnestly to work, bending close to her map and uttering the names in an audible, subdued tone, which often got into a chime. She looked amusingly girlish after all her deep experience, nodding her head and marking the names off on her fingers, with a little pursing of her lip, and now and then breaking off to put her hands on each side of her face and say, "Oh dear! Oh dear!"

There was no reason why this should end any more than a merry-go-round, but it was at last interrupted by the opening of the door and the announcement of Miss Noble.

The little old lady, whose bonnet hardly reached Dorothea's shoulder, was warmly welcomed, but while her hand was being pressed she made many of her beaver-like noises, as if she had something difficult to say.

"Do sit down," said Dorothea, rolling a chair forward. "Am I wanted for anything? I shall be so glad if I can do anything."

"I will not stay," said Miss Noble, putting her hand into her small basket and holding some article inside it nervously; "I have left a friend in the churchyard." She lapsed into her inarticulate sounds and unconsciously drew forth the article which she was fingering. It was the tortoise-shell lozenge-box, and Dorothea felt the colour mounting to her cheeks.

"Mr. Ladislaw," continued the timid little woman. "He fears he has offended you and has begged me to ask if you will see him for a few minutes."

Dorothea did not answer on the instant; it was crossing her mind that she could not receive him in this library, where her husband's prohibition seemed to dwell. She looked towards the window. Could she go out and meet him in the grounds? The sky was heavy, and the trees had begun to shiver as at a coming storm. Besides, she shrank from going out to him.

"Do see him, Mrs. Casaubon," said Miss Noble pathetically; "else I must go back and say No, and that will hurt him."

"Yes, I will see him," said Dorothea. "Pray tell him to come."

What else was there to be done? There was nothing that she longed for at that moment except to see Will; the possibility of seeing him had thrust itself insistently between her and every other object, and yet she had a throbbing excitement like an alarm upon her, a sense that she was doing something daringly defiant for his sake.

When the little lady had trotted away on her mission, Dorothea stood in the middle of the library with her hands falling clasped before her, making no attempt to compose herself in an attitude of dignified unconsciousness. What she was least conscious of just then was her own body; she was thinking of what was likely to be in Will's mind and of the hard feelings that others had had about him. How could any duty bind her to hardness? Resistance to unjust dispraise had mingled with her feeling for him from the very first, and now in the rebound of her heart after her anguish the resistance was stronger than ever. "If I love him too much it is because he has been used so ill"; there was a voice within her saying this to some

imagined audience in the library when the door was opened and she saw Will before her.

She did not move, and he came towards her with more doubt and timidity in his face than she had ever seen before. He was in a state of uncertainty which made him afraid lest some look or word of his should condemn him to a new distance from her, and Dorothea was afraid of her own emotion. She looked as if there were a spell upon her, keeping her motionless and hindering her from unclasping her hands, while some intense, grave yearning was imprisoned within her eyes. Seeing that she did not put out her hand as usual, Will paused a yard from her and said with embarrassment, "I am so grateful to you for seeing me."

"I wanted to see you," said Dorothea, having no other words at command. It did not occur to her to sit down, and Will did not give a cheerful interpretation to this queenly way of receiving him; but he went on to say what he had made up his mind to say.

"I fear you think me foolish and perhaps wrong for coming back so soon. I have been punished for my impatience. You know—everyone knows now—a painful story about my parentage. I knew of it before I went away, and I always meant to tell you of it if—if we ever met again."

There was a slight movement in Dorothea, and she unclasped her hands but immediately folded them over each other.

"But the affair is matter of gossip now," Will continued. "I wished you to know that something connected with it, something which happened before I went away, helped to bring me down here again. At least I thought it excused my coming. It was the idea of getting Bulstrode to apply some money to a public purpose, some money which he had thought of giving me. Perhaps it is rather to Bulstrode's credit that he privately offered me compensation for an old injury; he offered to give me a good income to make amends, but I suppose you know the disagreeable story?"

Will looked doubtfully at Dorothea, but his manner was gathering some of the defiant courage with which he always thought of this fact in his destiny. He added, "You know that it must be altogether painful to me."

"Yes—yes—I know," said Dorothea hastily.

"I did not choose to accept an income from such a source. I was sure that you would not think well of me if I did so," said Will. Why should he mind saying anything of that sort to her now? She knew that he had avowed his love for her. "I felt that—" He broke off nevertheless.

"You acted as I should have expected you to act," said Dorothea, her face brightening and her head becoming a little more erect on its beautiful stem.

"I did not believe that you would let any circumstance of my birth create a prejudice in you against me, though it was sure to do so in others," said Will, shaking his head backward in his old way and looking with a grave appeal into her eyes.

"If it were a new hardship it would be a new reason for me to cling to you," said Dorothea fervidly. "Nothing could have changed me but"—her heart was swelling, and it was difficult to go on; she made a great effort over herself to say in a low tremulous voice—"but thinking that you were different, not so good as I had believed you to be."

"You are sure to believe me better than I am in everything but one," said Will, giving way to his own feeling in the evidence of hers. "I mean, in my truth to you. When I thought you doubted of that, I didn't care about anything that was left. I thought it was all over with me, and there was nothing to try for—only things to endure."

"I don't doubt you any longer," said Dorothea, putting out her hand, a vague fear for him impelling her unutterable affection.

He took her hand and raised it to his lips with something like a sob. But he stood with his hat and gloves in the other hand and might have done for the portrait of a royalist. Still it was difficult to loose the hand, and Dorothea, withdrawing it in a confusion that distressed her, looked and moved away.

"See how dark the clouds have become, and how the trees are tossed," she said, walking towards the window, yet speaking and moving with only a dim sense of what she was doing.

Will followed her at a little distance and leaned against the tall back of a leather chair, on which he ventured now to lay his hat and gloves, and free himself from the intolerable durance of formality to which he had been for the first time condemned in Dorothea's presence. It must be confessed that he felt very happy at that moment leaning on the chair. He was not much afraid of anything that she might feel now.

They stood silent, not looking at each other, but looking at the evergreens which were being tossed and were showing the pale underside of their leaves against the blackening sky. Will never enjoyed the prospect of a storm so much; it delivered him from the necessity of going away. Leaves and little branches were hurled about, and the thunder was getting nearer. The light was more and more sombre, but there came a flash of lightning which made them start and look at each other, and then smile. Dorothea began to say what she had been thinking of.

"That was a wrong thing for you to say, that you would have had nothing to try for. If we had lost our own chief good, other people's good would remain, and that is worth trying for. Some can be happy. I seemed to see that more clearly than ever when I was the most wretched. I can hardly think how I could have borne the trouble if that feeling had not come to me to make strength."

"You have never felt the sort of misery I felt," said Will; "the misery of knowing that you must despise me."

"But I have felt worse—it was worse to think ill—" Dorothea had begun impetuously, but broke off.

Will coloured. He had the sense that whatever she said was uttered in the vision of a fatality that kept them apart. He was silent a moment and then said passionately, "We may at least have the comfort of speaking to each other without disguise. Since I must go away, since we must always be divided, you may think of me as one on the brink of the grave."

While he was speaking there came a vivid flash of lightning which lit each of them up for the other, and the light seemed to be the terror of a hopeless love. Dorothea darted instantaneously from the window; Will followed her, seizing her hand with a spasmodic movement; and so they stood, with their hands clasped, like two children, looking out on the storm while the thunder gave a tremendous crack and roll above them and the rain began to pour down. Then they turned their faces towards each other, with the memory of his last words in them, and they did not loose each other's hands.

"There is no hope for me," said Will. "Even if you loved me as well as I love you—even if I were everything to you—I shall most likely always be very poor; on a sober calculation one can count on nothing but a creeping lot. It is impossible

for us ever to belong to each other. It is perhaps base of me to have asked for a word from you. I meant to go away into silence, but I have not been able to do what I meant."

"Don't be sorry," said Dorothea in her clear, tender tones. "I would rather share all the trouble of our parting."

Her lips trembled, and so did his. It was never known which lips were the first to move towards the other lips, but they kissed tremblingly and then they moved apart.

The rain was dashing against the window-panes as if an angry spirit were within it, and behind it was the great swoop of the wind; it was one of those moments in which both the busy and the idle pause with a certain awe.

Dorothea sat down on the seat nearest to her, a long, low ottoman in the middle of the room, and with her hands folded over each other on her lap looked at the dreary outer world. Will stood still an instant looking at her, then seated himself beside her and laid his hand on hers, which turned itself upward to be clasped. They sat in that way without looking at each other until the rain abated and began to fall in stillness. Each had been full of thoughts which neither of them could begin to utter.

But when the rain was quiet, Dorothea turned to look at Will. With passionate exclamation, as if some torture-screw were threatening him, he started up and said, "It is impossible!"

He went and leaned on the back of the chair again and seemed to be battling with his own anger, while she looked towards him sadly.

"It is as fatal as a murder or any other horror that divides people," he burst out again; "it is more intolerable—to have our life maimed by petty accidents."

"No—don't say that—your life need not be maimed," said Dorothea gently.

"Yes, it must," said Will angrily. "It is cruel of you to speak in that way, as if there were any comfort. You may see beyond the misery of it, but I don't. It is unkind, it is throwing back my love for you as if it were a trifle, to speak in that way in the face of the fact. We can never be married."

"Sometime—we might," said Dorothea in a trembling voice.

"When?" said Will bitterly. "What is the use of counting on any success of mine? It is a mere toss-up whether I shall ever do more than keep myself decently, unless I choose to sell myself as a mere pen and a mouthpiece. I can see that clearly enough. I could not offer myself to any woman, even if she had no luxuries to renounce."

There was silence. Dorothea's heart was full of something that she wanted to say, and yet the words were too difficult. She was wholly possessed by them; at that moment debate was mute within her. And it was very hard that she could not say what she wanted to say. Will was looking out of the window angrily. If he would have looked at her and not gone away from her side, she thought everything would have been easier. At last he turned, still resting against the chair, and stretching his hand automatically towards his hat, said with a sort of exasperation, "Good-bye."

"Oh, I cannot bear it; my heart will break," said Dorothea, starting from her seat, the flood of her young passion bearing down all the obstructions which had kept her silent, the great tears rising and falling in an instant. "I don't mind about poverty—I hate my wealth."

In an instant Will was close to her and had his arms round her, but she drew her head back and held his away gently that she might go on speaking, her large tear-filled eyes looking at his very simply, while she said in a sobbing, childlike way, "We could live quite well on my own fortune—it is too much—seven hundred a year—I want so little—no new clothes—and I will learn what everything costs."

CHAPTER 84

Though it be songe of old and yonge,
That I sholde be to blame,
Theyrs be the charge, that spoke so large
In hurtynge of my name.

—*The Not-Browne Mayde*

It was just after the Lords had thrown out the reform bill; that explains how Mr. Cadwallader came to be walking on the slope of the lawn near the great conservatory at Freshitt Hall, holding the *Times* in his hands behind him, while he talked with a trout-fisher's dispassionateness about the prospects of the country to Sir James Chettam. Mrs. Cadwallader, the dowager Lady Chettam, and Celia were sometimes seated on garden-chairs, sometimes walking to meet little Arthur, who was being drawn in his chariot, and as became the infantine Buddha, was sheltered by his sacred umbrella with handsome silken fringe.

The ladies also talked politics, though more fitfully. Mrs. Cadwallader was strong on the intended creation of peers; she had it for certain from her cousin that Truberry had gone over to the other side entirely at the instigation of his wife, who had scented peerages in the air from the very first introduction of the reform question and would sign her soul away to take precedence of her younger sister, who had married a baronet. Lady Chettam thought that such conduct was very reprehensible and remembered that Mrs. Truberry's mother was a Miss Walsingham of Melspring. Celia confessed it was nicer to be "Lady" than "Mrs." and that Dodo never minded about precedence if she could have her own way. Mrs. Cadwallader held that it was a poor satisfaction to take precedence when everybody about you knew that you had not a drop of good blood in your veins; and Celia again, stopping to look at Arthur, said, "It would be very nice, though, if he were a viscount—and his lordship's little tooth coming through! He might have been, if James had been an earl."

"My dear Celia," said the dowager, "James's title is worth far more than any new earldom. I never wished his father to be anything else than Sir James."

"Oh, I only meant about Arthur's little tooth," said Celia comfortably. "But see, here is my uncle coming."

She tripped off to meet her uncle, while Sir James and Mr. Cadwallader came forward to make one group with the ladies. Celia had slipped her arm through her uncle's, and he patted her hand with a rather melancholy "Well, my dear!" As they approached, it was evident that Mr. Brooke was looking dejected, but this was fully accounted for by the state of politics; and as he was shaking hands all round without more greeting than a "Well, you're all here, you know," the rector said laughingly, "Don't take the throwing out of the bill so much to heart, Brooke; you've got all the riff-raff of the country on your side."

"The bill, eh? Ah!" said Mr. Brooke with a mild distractedness of manner. "Thrown out, you know, eh? The Lords are going too far, though. They'll have to pull up. Sad news, you know. I mean, here at home—sad news. But you must not blame me, Chettam."

"What is the matter?" said Sir James. "Not another gamekeeper shot, I hope? It's what I should expect when a fellow like Trapping Bass is let off so easily."

"Gamekeeper? No. Let us go in; I can tell you all in the house, you know," said Mr. Brooke, nodding at the Cadwalladers to show that he included them in his confidence. "As to poachers like Trapping Bass, you know, Chettam," he continued as they were entering, "when you are a magistrate, you'll not find it so easy to commit. Severity is all very well, but it's a great deal easier when you've got somebody to do it for you. You have a soft place in your heart yourself, you know; you're not a Draco, a Jeffreys, that sort of thing."

Mr. Brooke was evidently in a state of nervous perturbation. When he had something painful to tell, it was usually his way to introduce it among a number of disjointed particulars as if it were a medicine that would get a milder flavour by mixing. He continued his chat with Sir James about the poachers until they were all seated, and Mrs. Cadwallader, impatient of this drivelling, said, "I'm dying to know the sad news. The gamekeeper is not shot; that is settled. What is it, then?"

"Well, it's a very trying thing, you know," said Mr. Brooke. "I'm glad you and the rector are here; it's a family matter—but you will help us all to bear it, Cadwallader. I've got to break it to you, my dear." Here Mr. Brooke looked at Celia. "You've no notion what it is, you know. And, Chettam, it will annoy you uncommonly, but, you see, you have not been able to hinder it any more than I have. There's something singular in things; they come round, you know."

"It must be about Dodo," said Celia, who had been used to think of her sister as the dangerous part of the family machinery. She had seated herself on a low stool against her husband's knee.

"For God's sake let us hear what it is!" said Sir James.

"Well, you know, Chettam, I couldn't help Casaubon's will; it was a sort of will to make things worse."

"Exactly," said Sir James hastily. "But *what* is worse?"

"Dorothea is going to be married again, you know," said Mr. Brooke, nodding towards Celia, who immediately looked up at her husband with a frightened glance and put her hand on his knee.

Sir James was almost white with anger, but he did not speak.

"Merciful heaven!" said Mrs. Cadwallader. "Not to young Ladislaw?"

Mr. Brooke nodded, saying, "Yes; to Ladislaw," and then fell into a prudential silence.

"You see, Humphrey!" said Mrs. Cadwallader, waving her arm towards her husband. "Another time you will admit that I have some foresight, or rather you will contradict me and be just as blind as ever. *You* supposed that the young gentleman was gone out of the country."

"So he might be, and yet come back," said the rector quietly.

"When did you learn this?" said Sir James, not liking to hear anyone else speak, though finding it difficult to speak himself.

"Yesterday," said Mr. Brooke meekly. "I went to Lowick. Dorothea sent for me, you know. It had come about quite suddenly—neither of them had any idea two days ago—not any idea, you know. There's something singular in things. But Dorothea is quite determined—it is no use opposing. I put it strongly to her. I did my duty, Chettam. But she can act as she likes, you know."

"It would have been better if I had called him out and shot him a year ago," said Sir James, not from bloody-mindedness, but because he needed something strong to say.

"Really, James, that would have been very disagreeable," said Celia.

"Be reasonable, Chettam. Look at the affair more quietly," said Mr. Cadwallader, sorry to see his good-natured friend so overmastered by anger.

"That is not so very easy for a man of any dignity—with any sense of right—when the affair happens to be in his own family," said Sir James, still in his white indignation. "It is perfectly scandalous. If Ladislaw had had a spark of honour he would have gone out of the country at once and never shown his face in it again. However, I am not surprised. The day after Casaubon's funeral I said what ought to be done. But I was not listened to."

"You wanted what was impossible, you know, Chettam," said Mr. Brooke. "You wanted him shipped off. I told you Ladislaw was not to be done as we liked with; he had his ideas. He was a remarkable fellow—I always said he was a remarkable fellow."

"Yes," said Sir James, unable to repress a retort, "it is rather a pity you formed that high opinion of him. We are indebted to that for his being lodged in this neighbourhood. We are indebted to that for seeing a woman like Dorothea degrading herself by marrying him." Sir James made little stoppages between his clauses, the words not coming easily. "A man so marked out by her husband's will that delicacy ought to have forbidden her from seeing him again—who takes her out of her proper rank—into poverty—has the meanness to accept such a sacrifice—has always had an objectionable position—a bad origin—and, *I believe*, is a man of little principle and light character. That is my opinion," Sir James ended emphatically, turning aside and crossing his leg.

"I pointed everything out to her," said Mr. Brooke apologetically. "I mean the poverty, and abandoning her position. I said, 'My dear, you don't know what it is to live on seven hundred a year and have no carriage and that kind of thing, and go amongst people who don't know who you are.' I put it strongly to her. But I advise you to talk to Dorothea herself. The fact is, she has a dislike to Casaubon's property. You will hear what she says, you know."

"No—excuse me—I shall not," said Sir James with more coolness. "I cannot bear to see her again; it is too painful. It hurts me too much that a woman like Dorothea should have done what is wrong."

"Be just, Chettam," said the easy, large-lipped rector, who objected to all this unnecessary discomfort. "Mrs. Casaubon may be acting imprudently; she is giving up a fortune for the sake of a man, and we men have so poor an opinion of each other that we can hardly call a woman wise who does that. But I think you should not condemn it as a wrong action, in the strict sense of the word."

"Yes, I do," answered Sir James. "I think that Dorothea commits a wrong action in marrying Ladislaw."

"My dear fellow, we are rather apt to consider an act wrong because it is unpleasant to us," said the rector quietly. Like many men who take life easily, he had the knack of saying a home truth occasionally to those who felt themselves virtuously out of temper. Sir James took out his handkerchief and began to bite the corner.

"It is very dreadful of Dodo, though," said Celia, wishing to justify her husband. "She said she *never would* marry again, not anybody at all."

"I heard her say the same thing myself," said Lady Chettam majestically, as if this were royal evidence.

"Oh, there is usually a silent exception in such cases," said Mrs. Cadwallader. "The only wonder to me is that any of you are surprised. You did nothing to hinder it. If you would have had Lord Triton down here to woo her with his philanthropy, he might have carried her off before the year was over. There was no safety in anything else. Mr. Casaubon had prepared all this as beautifully as possible. He made himself disagreeable—or it pleased God to make him so—and then he dared her to contradict him. It's the way to make any trumpery tempting, to ticket it at a high price in that way."

"I don't know what you mean by wrong, Cadwallader," said Sir James, still feeling a little stung and turning round in his chair towards the rector. "He's not a man we can take into the family. At least, I must speak for myself," he continued, carefully keeping his eyes off Mr. Brooke. "I suppose others will find his society too pleasant to care about the propriety of the thing."

"Well, you know, Chettam," said Mr. Brooke good-humouredly, nursing his leg, "I can't turn my back on Dorothea. I must be a father to her up to a certain point. I said, 'My dear, I won't refuse to give you away.' I had spoken strongly before. But I can cut off the entail, you know. It will cost money and be troublesome, but I can do it, you know."

Mr. Brooke nodded at Sir James and felt that he was both showing his own force of resolution and propitiating what was just in the baronet's vexation. He had hit on a more ingenious mode of parrying than he was aware of. He had touched a motive of which Sir James was ashamed. The mass of his feeling about Dorothea's marriage to Ladislaw was due partly to excusable prejudice, or even justifiable opinion, partly to a jealous repugnance hardly less in Ladislaw's case than in Casaubon's. He was convinced that the marriage was a fatal one for Dorothea. But amid that mass ran a vein of which he was too good and honourable a man to like the avowal even to himself: it was undeniable that the union of the two estates —Tipton and Freshitt—lying charmingly within a ring-fence, was a prospect that flattered him for his son and heir. Hence

when Mr. Brooke noddingly appealed to that motive, Sir James felt a sudden embarrassment; there was a stoppage in his throat; he even blushed. He had found more words than usual in the first jet of his anger, but Mr. Brooke's propitiation was more clogging to his tongue than Mr. Cadwallader's caustic hint.

But Celia was glad to have room for speech after her uncle's suggestion of the marriage ceremony, and she said, though with as little eagerness of manner as if the question had turned on an invitation to dinner, "Do you mean that Dodo is going to be married directly, Uncle?"

"In three weeks, you know," said Mr. Brooke helplessly. "I can do nothing to hinder it, Cadwallader," he added, turning for a little countenance toward the rector, who said, "*I* should not make any fuss about it. If she likes to be poor, that is her affair. Nobody would have said anything if she had married the young fellow because he was rich. Plenty of beneficed clergy are poorer than they will be. Here is Elinor," continued the provoking husband; "she vexed her friends by marrying me. I had hardly a thousand a year—I was a lout—nobody could see anything in me—my shoes were not the right cut—all the men wondered how a woman could like me. Upon my word, I must take Ladislaw's part until I hear more harm of him."

"Humphrey, that is all sophistry, and you know it," said his wife. "Everything is all one—that is the beginning and end with you. As if you had not been a Cadwallader! Does anyone suppose that I could have taken such a monster as you by any other name?"

"And a clergyman too," observed Lady Chettam with approbation. "Elinor cannot be said to have descended below her rank. It is difficult to say what Mr. Ladislaw is, eh, James?"

Sir James gave a small grunt, which was less respectful than his usual mode of answering his mother. Celia looked up at him like a thoughtful kitten.

"It must be admitted that his blood is a frightful mixture!" said Mrs. Cadwallader. "The Casaubon cuttle-fish fluid to begin with, and then a rebellious Polish fiddler or dancing-master, was it? And then an old clo—"

"Nonsense, Elinor," said the rector, rising. "It is time for us to go."

"After all, he is a pretty sprig," said Mrs. Cadwallader, rising too and wishing to make amends. "He is like the fine old Crichley portraits before the idiots came in."

"I'll go with you," said Mr. Brooke, starting up with alacrity. "You must all come and dine with me tomorrow, you know—eh, Celia, my dear?"

"You will, James—won't you?" said Celia, taking her husband's hand.

"Oh, of course, if you like," said Sir James, pulling down his waistcoat but unable yet to adjust his face good-humouredly. "That is to say, if it is not to meet anybody else."

"No, no, no," said Mr. Brooke, understanding the condition. "Dorothea would not come, you know, unless you had been to see her."

When Sir James and Celia were alone, she said, "Do you mind about my having the carriage to go to Lowick, James?"

"What, now, directly?" he answered with some surprise.

"Yes, it is very important," said Celia.

"Remember, Celia, I cannot see her," said Sir James.

"Not if she gave up marrying?"

"What is the use of saying that? However, I'm going to the stables. I'll tell Briggs to bring the carriage round."

Celia thought it was of great use, if not to say that, at least to take a journey to Lowick in order to influence Dorothea's mind. All through their girlhood she had felt that she could act on her sister by a word judiciously placed, by opening a little window for the daylight of her own understanding to enter among the strange coloured lamps by which Dodo habitually saw. And Celia the matron naturally felt more able to advise her childless sister. How could anyone understand Dodo so well as Celia did, or love her so tenderly?

Dorothea, busy in her boudoir, felt a glow of pleasure at the sight of her sister so soon after the revelation of her intended marriage. She had prefigured to herself, even with exaggeration, the disgust of her friends, and she had even feared that Celia might be kept aloof from her.

"O Kitty, I am delighted to see you!" said Dorothea, putting her hands on Celia's shoulders and beaming on her. "I almost thought you would not come to me."

"I have not brought Arthur because I was in a hurry," said Celia, and they sat down on two small chairs opposite each other, with their knees touching.

"You know, Dodo, it is very bad," said Celia in her placid guttural, looking as prettily free from humours as possible. "You have disappointed us all so. And I can't think that it ever *will* be—you never can go and live in that way. And then there are all your plans. You never can have thought of that. James would have taken any trouble for you, and you might have gone on all your life doing what you liked."

"On the contrary, dear," said Dorothea, "I never could do anything that I liked. I have never carried out any plan yet."

"Because you always wanted things that wouldn't do. But other plans would have come. And how *can* you marry Mr. Ladislaw, that we none of us ever thought you *could* marry? It shocks James so dreadfully. And then it is all so different from what you have always been. You would have Mr. Casaubon because he had such a great soul and was so old and dismal and learned; and now, to think of marrying Mr. Ladislaw, who has got no estate or anything. I suppose it is because you must be making yourself uncomfortable in some way or other."

Dorothea laughed.

"Well, it is very serious, Dodo," said Celia, becoming more impressive. "How will you live? And you will go away among queer people. And I shall never see you—and you won't mind about little Arthur—and I thought you always would—"

Celia's rare tears had got into her eyes, and the corners of her mouth were agitated.

"Dear Celia," said Dorothea with tender gravity, "if you don't ever see me, it will not be my fault."

"Yes, it will," said Celia with the same touching distortion of her small features. "How can I come to you or have you with me when James can't bear it? That is because he thinks it is not right—he thinks you are so wrong, Dodo. But you

always were wrong; only I can't help loving you. And nobody can think where you will live; where can you go?"

"I am going to London," said Dorothea.

"How can you always live in a street? And you will be so poor. I could give you half my things, only how can I when I never see you?"

"Bless you, Kitty," said Dorothea with gentle warmth. "Take comfort; perhaps James will forgive me sometime."

"But it would be much better if you would not be married," said Celia, drying her eyes and returning to her argument; "then there would be nothing uncomfortable. And you would not do what nobody thought you could do. James always said you ought to be a queen; but this is not at all being like a queen. You know what mistakes you have always been making, Dodo, and this is another. Nobody thinks Mr. Ladislaw a proper husband for you. And you *said* you would never be married again."

"It is quite true that I might be a wiser person, Celia," said Dorothea, "and that I might have done something better if I had been better. But this is what I am going to do. I have promised to marry Mr. Ladislaw, and I am going to marry him."

The tone in which Dorothea said this was a note that Celia had long learned to recognize. She was silent a few moments, and then said, as if she had dismissed all contest, "Is he very fond of you, Dodo?"

"I hope so. I am very fond of him."

"That is nice," said Celia comfortably. "Only I would rather you had such a sort of husband as James is, with a place very near, that I could drive to."

Dorothea smiled, and Celia looked rather meditative. Presently she said, "I cannot think how it all came about." Celia thought it would be pleasant to hear the story.

"I dare say not," said Dorothea, pinching her sister's chin. "If you knew how it came about, it would not seem wonderful to you."

"Can't you tell me?" said Celia, settling her arms cozily.

"No, dear, you would have to feel with me, else you would never know."

CHAPTER 85

> Then went the jury out, whose names were Mr. Blindman, Mr. No-good, Mr. Malice, Mr. Love-lust, Mr. Live-loose, Mr. Heady, Mr. High-mind, Mr. Enmity, Mr. Liar, Mr. Cruelty, Mr. Hate-light, Mr. Implacable, who every one gave in his private verdict against him among themselves, and afterwards unanimously concluded to bring him in guilty before the judge. And first among themselves, Mr. Blindman, the foreman, said, I see clearly that this man is a heretic. Then said Mr. No-good, Away with such a fellow from the earth! Ay, said Mr. Malice, for I hate the very look of him. Then said Mr. Love-lust, I could never endure him. Nor I, said Mr. Live-loose; for he would be always condemning my way. Hang him, hang him, said Mr. Heady. A sorry scrub, said Mr. High-mind. My heart riseth against him, said Mr. Enmity. He is a rogue, said Mr. Liar. Hanging is too good for him, said Mr. Cruelty. Let us despatch him out of the way, said Mr. Hate-light. Then said Mr. Implacable, Might I have all the world given me, I could not be reconciled to him; therefore let us forthwith bring him in guilty of death.
>
> —*Pilgrim's Progress*

When immortal Bunyan makes his picture of the persecuting passions bringing in their verdict of guilty, who pities Faithful? That is a rare and blessed lot which some greatest men have not attained, to know ourselves guiltless before a condemning crowd, to be sure that what we are denounced for is solely the good in us. The pitiable lot is that of the man who could not call himself a martyr even though he were to persuade himself that the men who stoned him were but ugly passions incarnate, who knows that he is stoned, not for professing the Right, but for not being the man he professed to be.

This was the consciousness that Bulstrode was withering under while he made his preparations for departing from Middlemarch, and going to end his stricken life in that sad refuge, the indifference of new faces. The duteous, merciful constancy of his wife had delivered him from one dread, but it could not hinder her presence from being still a tribunal before which he shrank from confession and desired advocacy. His equivocations with himself about the death of Raffles had sustained the conception of an Omniscience whom he prayed to, yet he had a terror upon him which would not let him expose them to judgement by a full confession to his wife; the acts which he had washed and diluted with inward argument and motive, and for which it seemed comparatively easy to win invisible pardon—what name would she call them by? That she should ever silently call his acts murder was what he could not bear. He felt shrouded by her doubt; he got strength to face her from the sense that she could not yet feel warranted in pronouncing that worst condemnation on him. Sometime, perhaps—when he was dying—he would tell her all; in the deep shadow of that time, when she held his hand in the gathering darkness, she might listen without recoiling from his touch. Perhaps, but concealment had been the habit of his life, and the impulse to confession had no power against the dread of a deeper humiliation.

He was full of timid care for his wife, not only because he deprecated any harshness of judgement from her, but because he felt a deep distress at the sight of her suffering. She had sent her daughters away to board at a school on the coast that this crisis might be hidden from them as far as possible. Set free by their absence from the intolerable necessity of accounting for her grief or of beholding their frightened wonder, she could live unconstrainedly with the sorrow that was every day streaking her hair with whiteness and making her eyelids languid.

"Tell me anything that you would like to have me do, Harriet," Bulstrode had said to her; "I mean with regard to arrangements of property. It is my intention not to sell the land I possess in this neighbourhood, but to leave it to you as a safe provision. If you have any wish on such subjects, do not conceal it from me."

A few days afterwards, when she had returned from a visit to her brother's, she began to speak to her husband on a subject which had for some time been in her mind.

"I *should* like to do something for my brother's family, Nicholas; and I think we are bound to make some amends to Rosamond and her husband. Walter says Mr. Lydgate must leave the town, and his practice is almost good for nothing, and they have very little left to settle anywhere with. I would rather do without something for ourselves to make some amends to my poor brother's family."

Mrs. Bulstrode did not wish to go nearer to the facts than in the phrase "make some amends," knowing that her husband must understand her. He had a particular reason, which she was not aware of, for wincing under her suggestion.

He hesitated before he said, "It is not possible to carry out your wish in the way you propose, my dear. Mr. Lydgate has virtually rejected any further service from me. He has returned the thousand pounds which I lent him. Mrs. Casaubon advanced him the sum for that purpose. Here is his letter."

The letter seemed to cut Mrs. Bulstrode severely. The mention of Mrs. Casaubon's loan seemed a reflection of that public feeling which held it a matter of course that everyone would avoid a connexion with her husband. She was silent for some time, and the tears fell one after the other, her chin trembling as she wiped them away. Bulstrode, sitting opposite to her, ached at the sight of that grief-worn face, which two months before had been bright and blooming. It had aged to keep sad company with his own withered features.

Urged into some effort at comforting her, he said, "There is another means, Harriet, by which I might do a service to your brother's family if you like to act in it. And it would, I think, be beneficial to you; it would be an advantageous way of managing the land which I mean to be yours."

She looked attentive.

"Garth once thought of undertaking the management of Stone Court in order to place your nephew Fred there. The stock

was to remain as it is, and they were to pay a certain share of the profits instead of an ordinary rent. That would be a desirable beginning for the young man, in conjunction with his employment under Garth. Would it be a satisfaction to you?"

"Yes, it would," said Mrs. Bulstrode with some return of energy. "Poor Walter is so cast down; I would try anything in my power to do him some good before I go away. We have always been brother and sister."

"You must make the proposal to Garth yourself, Harriet," said Mr. Bulstrode, not liking what he had to say, but desiring the end he had in view for other reasons besides the consolation of his wife. "You must state to him that the land is virtually yours and that he need have no transactions with me. Communications can be made through Standish. I mention this because Garth gave up being my agent. I can put into your hands a paper which he himself drew up, stating conditions; and you can propose his renewed acceptance of them. I think it is not unlikely that he will accept when you propose the thing for the sake of your nephew."

CHAPTER 86

Le coeur se sature d'amour comme d'un sel divin qui le conserve; de là l'incorruptible adhérence de ceux qui se sont aimés dès l'aube de la vie, et la fraîcheur des vielles amours prolongés. Il existe un embaumement d'amour. C'est de Daphnis et Chloë que sont faits Philémon et Baucis. Cette vieillesse là, ressemblance du soir avec l'aurore.

—VICTOR HUGO: *L'HOMME QUI RIT*

Mrs. Garth, hearing Caleb enter the passage about tea time, opened the parlour-door and said, "There you are, Caleb. Have you had your dinner?" (Mr. Garth's meals were much subordinated to "business.")

"Oh yes, a good dinner—cold mutton and I don't know what. Where is Mary?"

"In the garden with Letty, I think."

"Fred is not come yet?"

"No. Are you going out again without taking tea, Caleb?" said Mrs. Garth, seeing that her absent-minded husband was putting on again the hat which he had just taken off.

"No, no; I'm only going to Mary a minute."

Mary was in a grassy corner of the garden, where there was a swing loftily hung between two pear-trees. She had a pink kerchief tied over her head, making a little poke to shade her eyes from the level sunbeams, while she was giving a glorious swing to Letty, who laughed and screamed wildly.

Seeing her father, Mary left the swing and went to meet him, pushing back the pink kerchief and smiling afar off at him with the involuntary smile of loving pleasure.

"I came to look for you, Mary," said Mr. Garth. "Let us walk about a bit."

Mary knew quite well that her father had something particular to say; his eyebrows made their pathetic angle, and there was a tender gravity in his voice: these things had been signs to her when she was Letty's age. She put her arm within his, and they turned by the row of nut-trees.

"It will be a sad while before you can be married, Mary," said her father, not looking at her but at the end of the stick which he held in his other hand.

"Not a sad while, Father—I mean to be merry," said Mary laughingly. "I have been single and merry for four-and-twenty years and more; I suppose it will not be quite as long again as that." Then, after a little pause, she said more gravely, bending her face before her father's, "If you are contented with Fred?"

Caleb screwed up his mouth and turned his head aside wisely.

"Now, Father, you did praise him last Wednesday. You said he had an uncommon notion of stock and a good eye for things."

"Did I?" said Caleb rather slyly.

"Yes, I put it all down, and the date, *anno Domini*, and everything," said Mary. "You like things to be neatly booked. And then his behaviour to you, Father, is really good; he has a deep respect for you; and it is impossible to have a better temper than Fred has."

"Ay, ay; you want to coax me into thinking him a fine match."

"No, indeed, Father. I don't love him because he is a fine match."

"What for, then?"

"Oh, dear, because I have always loved him. I should never like scolding anyone else so well, and that is a point to be thought of in a husband."

"Your mind is quite settled, then, Mary?" said Caleb, returning to his first tone. "There's no other wish come into it since things have been going on as they have been of late?" (Caleb meant a great deal in that vague phrase.) "Because, better late than never. A woman must not force her heart—she'll do a man no good by that."

"My feelings have not changed, Father," said Mary calmly. "I shall be constant to Fred as long as he is constant to me. I don't think either of us could spare the other or like anyone else better, however much we might admire them. It would make too great a difference to us—like seeing all the old places altered, and changing the name for everything. We must wait for each other a long while, but Fred knows that."

Instead of speaking immediately, Caleb stood still and screwed his stick on the grassy walk. Then he said, with emotion in his voice, "Well, I've got a bit of news. What do you think of Fred going to live at Stone Court and managing the land there?"

"How can that ever be, Father?" said Mary wonderingly.

"He would manage it for his aunt Bulstrode. The poor woman has been to me begging and praying. She wants to do the lad good, and it might be a fine thing for him. With saving, he might gradually buy the stock, and he has a turn for farming."

"Oh, Fred would be so happy! It is too good to believe."

"Ah, but mind you," said Caleb, turning his head warningly, "I must take it on *my* shoulders, and be responsible, and see after everything; and that will grieve your mother a bit, though she mayn't say so. Fred had need be careful."

"Perhaps it is too much, Father," said Mary, checked in her joy. "There would be no happiness in bringing you any fresh

trouble."

"Nay, nay; work is my delight, child, when it doesn't vex your mother. And then, if you and Fred get married"—here Caleb's voice shook just perceptibly—"he'll be steady and saving; and you've got your mother's cleverness, and mine too, in a woman's sort of way; and you'll keep him in order. He'll be coming by and by, so I wanted to tell you first because I think you'd like to tell *him* by yourselves. After that, I could talk it well over with him, and we could go into business and the nature of things."

"Oh, you dear good father!" cried Mary, putting her hands round her father's neck while he bent his head placidly, willing to be caressed. "I wonder if any other girl thinks her father the best man in the world!"

"Nonsense, child; you'll think your husband better."

"Impossible," said Mary, relapsing into her usual tone; "husbands are an inferior class of men, who require keeping in order."

When they were entering the house with Letty, who had run to join them, Mary saw Fred at the orchard-gate and went to meet him.

"What fine clothes you wear, you extravagant youth!" said Mary as Fred stood still and raised his hat to her with playful formality. "You are not learning economy."

"Now that is too bad, Mary," said Fred. "Just look at the edges of these coat-cuffs! It is only by dint of good brushing that I look respectable. I am saving up three suits—one for a wedding-suit."

"How very droll you will look! Like a gentleman in an old fashion-book."

"Oh no, they will keep two years."

"Two years! Be reasonable, Fred," said Mary, turning to walk. "Don't encourage flattering expectations."

"Why not? One lives on them better than on unflattering ones. If we can't be married in two years, the truth will be quite bad enough when it comes."

"I have heard a story of a young gentleman who once encouraged flattering expectations, and they did him harm."

"Mary, if you've got something discouraging to tell me, I shall bolt; I shall go into the house to Mr. Garth. I am out of spirits. My father is so cut up—home is not like itself. I can't bear any more bad news."

"Should you call it bad news to be told that you were to live at Stone Court, and manage the farm, and be remarkably prudent, and save money every year till all the stock and furniture were your own, and you were a distinguished agricultural character, as Mr. Borthrop Trumbull says—rather stout, I fear, and with the Greek and Latin sadly weather-worn?"

"You don't mean anything except nonsense, Mary?" said Fred, colouring slightly nevertheless.

"That is what my father has just told me of as what may happen, and he never talks nonsense," said Mary, looking up at Fred now, while he grasped her hand as they walked, till it rather hurt her; but she would not complain.

"Oh, I could be a tremendously good fellow then, Mary, and we could be married directly."

"Not so fast, sir; how do you know that I would not rather defer our marriage for some years? That would leave you time to misbehave, and then if I liked someone else better, I should have an excuse for jilting you."

"Pray don't joke, Mary," said Fred with strong feeling. "Tell me seriously that all this is true and that you are happy because of it—because you love me best."

"It is all true, Fred, and I am happy because of it—because I love you best," said Mary in a tone of obedient recitation.

They lingered on the doorstep under the steep-roofed porch, and Fred almost in a whisper said, "When we were first engaged, with the umbrella-ring, Mary, you used to—"

The spirit of joy began to laugh more decidedly in Mary's eyes, but the fatal Ben came running to the door with Brownie yapping behind him, and bouncing against them, said, "Fred and Mary! Are you ever coming in? Or may I eat your cake?"

FINALE

Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending. Who can quit young lives after being long in company with them and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years? For the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web; promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-waited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval.

Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning, as it was to Adam and Eve, who kept their honeymoon in Eden but had their first little one among the thorns and thistles of the wilderness. It is still the beginning of the home epic—the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete union which makes the advancing years a climax and age the harvest of sweet memories in common.

Some set out, like crusaders of old, with a glorious equipment of hope and enthusiasm and get broken by the way, wanting patience with each other and the world.

All who have cared for Fred Vincy and Mary Garth will like to know that these two made no such failure, but achieved a solid, mutual happiness. Fred surprised his neighbours in various ways. He became rather distinguished in his side of the county as a theoretic and practical farmer and produced a work on the *Cultivation of Green Crops and the Economy of Cattle-Feeding* which won him high congratulations at agricultural meetings. In Middlemarch admiration was more reserved; most persons there were inclined to believe that the merit of Fred's authorship was due to his wife, since they had never expected Fred Vincy to write on turnips and mangel-wurzel.

But when Mary wrote a little book for her boys, called *Stories of Great Men, Taken from Plutarch*, and had it printed and published by Gripp & Co., Middlemarch, everyone in the town was willing to give the credit of this work to Fred, observing that he had been to the university, "where the ancients were studied," and might have been a clergyman if he had chosen.

In this way it was made clear that Middlemarch had never been deceived and that there was no need to praise anybody for writing a book, since it was always done by somebody else.

Moreover, Fred remained unswervingly steady. Some years after his marriage he told Mary that his happiness was half owing to Farebrother, who gave him a strong pull-up at the right moment. I cannot say that he was never again misled by his hopefulness: the yield of crops or the profits of a cattle sale usually fell below his estimate; and he was always prone to believe that he could make money by the purchase of a horse, which turned out badly—though this, Mary observed, was of course the fault of the horse, not of Fred's judgement. He kept his love of horsemanship, but he rarely allowed himself a day's hunting; and when he did so, it was remarkable that he submitted to be laughed at for cowardliness at the fences, seeming to see Mary and the boys sitting on the five-barred gate or showing their curly heads between hedge and ditch.

There were three boys: Mary was not discontented that she brought forth men-children only, and when Fred wished to have a girl like her, she said laughingly, "That would be too great a trial to your mother." Mrs. Vincy in her declining years, and in the diminished lustre of her housekeeping, was much comforted by her perception that two at least of Fred's boys were real Vincys and did not "feature the Garths." But Mary secretly rejoiced that the youngest of the three was very much what her father must have been when he wore a round jacket, and showed a marvellous nicety of aim in playing at marbles or in throwing stones to bring down the mellow pears.

Ben and Letty Garth, who were uncle and aunt before they were well in their teens, disputed much as to whether nephews or nieces were more desirable, Ben contending that it was clear girls were good for less than boys, else they would not be always in petticoats, which showed how little they were meant for; whereupon Letty, who argued much from books, got angry in replying that God made coats of skins for both Adam and Eve alike—also it occurred to her that in the East the men too wore petticoats. But this latter argument, obscuring the majesty of the former, was one too many, for Ben answered contemptuously, "The more spooneys they!" and immediately appealed to his mother whether boys were not better than girls. Mrs. Garth pronounced that both were alike naughty, but that boys were undoubtedly stronger, could run faster, and throw with more precision to a greater distance. With this oracular sentence Ben was well satisfied, not minding the naughtiness; but Letty took it ill, her feeling of superiority being stronger than her muscles.

Fred never became rich—his hopefulness had not led him to expect that; but he gradually saved enough to become owner of the stock and furniture at Stone Court, and the work which Mr. Garth put into his hands carried him in plenty through those "bad times" which are always present with farmers. Mary, in her matronly days, became as solid in figure as her mother, but, unlike her, gave the boys little formal teaching, so that Mrs. Garth was alarmed lest they should never be well grounded in grammar and geography. Nevertheless, they were found quite forward enough when they went to school, perhaps because they had liked nothing so well as being with their mother. When Fred was riding home on winter evenings he had a pleasant vision beforehand of the bright hearth in the wainscoted parlour, and was sorry for other men who could not have Mary for their wife, especially for Mr. Farebrother. "He was ten times worthier of you than I was," Fred could now say to her magnanimously. "To be sure he was," Mary answered; "and for that reason he could do better without me. But you—I shudder to think what you would have been—a curate in debt for horse-hire and cambric pocket-handkerchiefs!"

On inquiry it might possibly be found that Fred and Mary still inhabit Stone Court—that the creeping plants still cast the foam of their blossoms over the fine stone wall into the field where the walnut-trees stand in stately row—and that on

sunny days the two lovers who were first engaged with the umbrella-ring may be seen in white-haired placidity at the open window from which Mary Garth, in the days of old Peter Featherstone, had often been ordered to look out for Mr. Lydgate.

Lydgate's hair never became white. He died when he was only fifty, leaving his wife and children provided for by a heavy insurance on his life. He had gained an excellent practice, alternating, according to the season, between London and a Continental bathing-place, having written a treatise on gout, a disease which has a good deal of wealth on its side. His skill was relied on by many paying patients, but he always regarded himself as a failure: he had not done what he once meant to do. His acquaintances thought him enviable to have so charming a wife, and nothing happened to shake their opinion. Rosamond never committed a second compromising indiscretion. She simply continued to be mild in her temper, inflexible in her judgement, disposed to admonish her husband, and able to frustrate him by stratagem. As the years went on he opposed her less and less, whence Rosamond concluded that he had learned the value of her opinion; on the other hand, she had a more thorough conviction of his talents now that he gained a good income and instead of the threatened cage in Bride Street provided one all flowers and gilding, fit for the bird of paradise that she resembled. In brief, Lydgate was what is called a successful man. But he died prematurely of diphtheria, and Rosamond afterwards married an elderly and wealthy physician, who took kindly to her four children. She made a very pretty show with her daughters, driving out in her carriage, and often spoke of her happiness as "a reward"—she did not say for what, but probably she meant that it was a reward for her patience with Tertius, whose temper never became faultless, and to the last occasionally let slip a bitter speech which was more memorable than the signs he made of his repentance. He once called her his basil plant, and when she asked for an explanation said that basil was a plant which had flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains. Rosamond had a placid but strong answer to such speeches. Why then had he chosen her? It was a pity he had not had Mrs. Ladislaw, whom he was always praising and placing above her. And thus the conversation ended with the advantage on Rosamond's side. But it would be unjust not to tell that she never uttered a word in depreciation of Dorothea, keeping in religious remembrance the generosity which had come to her aid in the sharpest crisis of her life.

Dorothea herself had no dreams of being praised above other women, feeling that there was always something better which she might have done if she had only been better and known better. Still, she never repented that she had given up position and fortune to marry Will Ladislaw, and he would have held it the greatest shame as well as sorrow to him if she had repented. They were bound to each other by a love stronger than any impulses which could have marred it. No life would have been possible to Dorothea which was not filled with emotion, and she had now a life filled also with a beneficent activity which she had not the doubtful pains of discovering and marking out for herself. Will became an ardent public man, working well in those times when reforms were begun with a young hopefulness of immediate good which has been much checked in our days, and getting at last returned to Parliament, by a constituency who paid his expenses. Dorothea could have liked nothing better, since wrongs existed, than that her husband should be in the thick of a struggle against them and that she should give him wifely help. Many who knew her thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother. But no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done—not even Sir James Chettam, who went no further than the negative prescription that she ought not to have married Will Ladislaw.

But this opinion of his did not cause a lasting alienation, and the way in which the family was made whole again was characteristic of all concerned. Mr. Brooke could not resist the pleasure of corresponding with Will and Dorothea; and one morning when his pen had been remarkably fluent on the prospects of municipal reform, it ran off into an invitation to the Grange, which, once written, could not be done away with at less cost than the sacrifice (hardly to be conceived) of the whole valuable letter. During the months of this correspondence Mr. Brooke had continually, in his talk with Sir James Chettam, been presupposing or hinting that the intention of cutting off the entail was still maintained; and the day on which his pen gave the daring invitation, he went to Freshitt expressly to intimate that he had a stronger sense than ever of the reasons for taking that energetic step as a precaution against any mixture of low blood in the heir of the Brookes.

But that morning something exciting had happened at the hall. A letter had come to Celia which made her cry silently as she read it; and when Sir James, unused to see her in tears, asked anxiously what was the matter, she burst out in a wail such as he had never heard from her before.

"Dorothea has a little boy. And you will not let me go and see her. And I am sure she wants to see me. And she will not know what to do with the baby—she will do wrong things with it. And they thought she would die. It is very dreadful! Suppose it had been me and little Arthur, and Dodo had been hindered from coming to see me! I wish you would be less unkind, James!"

"Good heavens, Celia!" said Sir James, much wrought upon. "What do you wish? I will do anything you like. I will take you to town tomorrow if you wish it." And Celia did wish it.

It was after this that Mr. Brooke came, and meeting the baronet in the grounds, began to chat with him in ignorance of the news, which Sir James for some reason did not care to tell him immediately. But when the entail was touched on in the usual way, he said, "My dear sir, it is not for me to dictate to you, but for my part I would let that alone. I would let things remain as they are."

Mr. Brooke felt so much surprise that he did not at once find out how much he was relieved by the sense that he was not expected to do anything in particular.

Such being the bent of Celia's heart, it was inevitable that Sir James should consent to a reconciliation with Dorothea and her husband. Where women love each other, men learn to smother their mutual dislike. Sir James never liked Ladislaw, and Will always preferred to have Sir James's company mixed with another kind; they were on a footing of reciprocal tolerance, which was made quite easy only when Dorothea and Celia were present.

It became an understood thing that Mr. and Mrs. Ladislaw should pay at least two visits during the year to the Grange, and there came gradually a small row of cousins at Freshitt who enjoyed playing with the two cousins visiting Tipton as much as if the blood of these cousins had been less dubiously mixed.

Mr. Brooke lived to a good old age, and his estate was inherited by Dorothea's son, who might have represented Middlemarch, but declined, thinking that his opinions had less chance of being stifled if he remained out of doors.

Sir James never ceased to regard Dorothea's second marriage as a mistake; and indeed this remained the tradition concerning it in Middlemarch, where she was spoken of to a younger generation as a fine girl who married a sickly clergyman, old enough to be her father, and in little more than a year after his death gave up her estate to marry his cousin, young enough to have been his son, with no property, and not well-born. Those who had not seen anything of Dorothea usually observed that she could not have been "a nice woman," else she would not have married either the one or the other.

Certainly those determining acts of her life were not ideally beautiful. They were the mixed result of young and noble impulse struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state, in which great feelings will often take the aspect of error, and great faith the aspect of illusion. For there is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it. A new Theresa will hardly have the opportunity of reforming a conventual life, any more than a new Antigone will spend her heroic piety in daring all for the sake of a brother's burial: the medium in which their ardent deeds took shape is forever gone. But we insignificant people with our daily words and acts are preparing the lives of many Dorotheas, some of which may present a far sadder sacrifice than that of the Dorothea whose story we know.

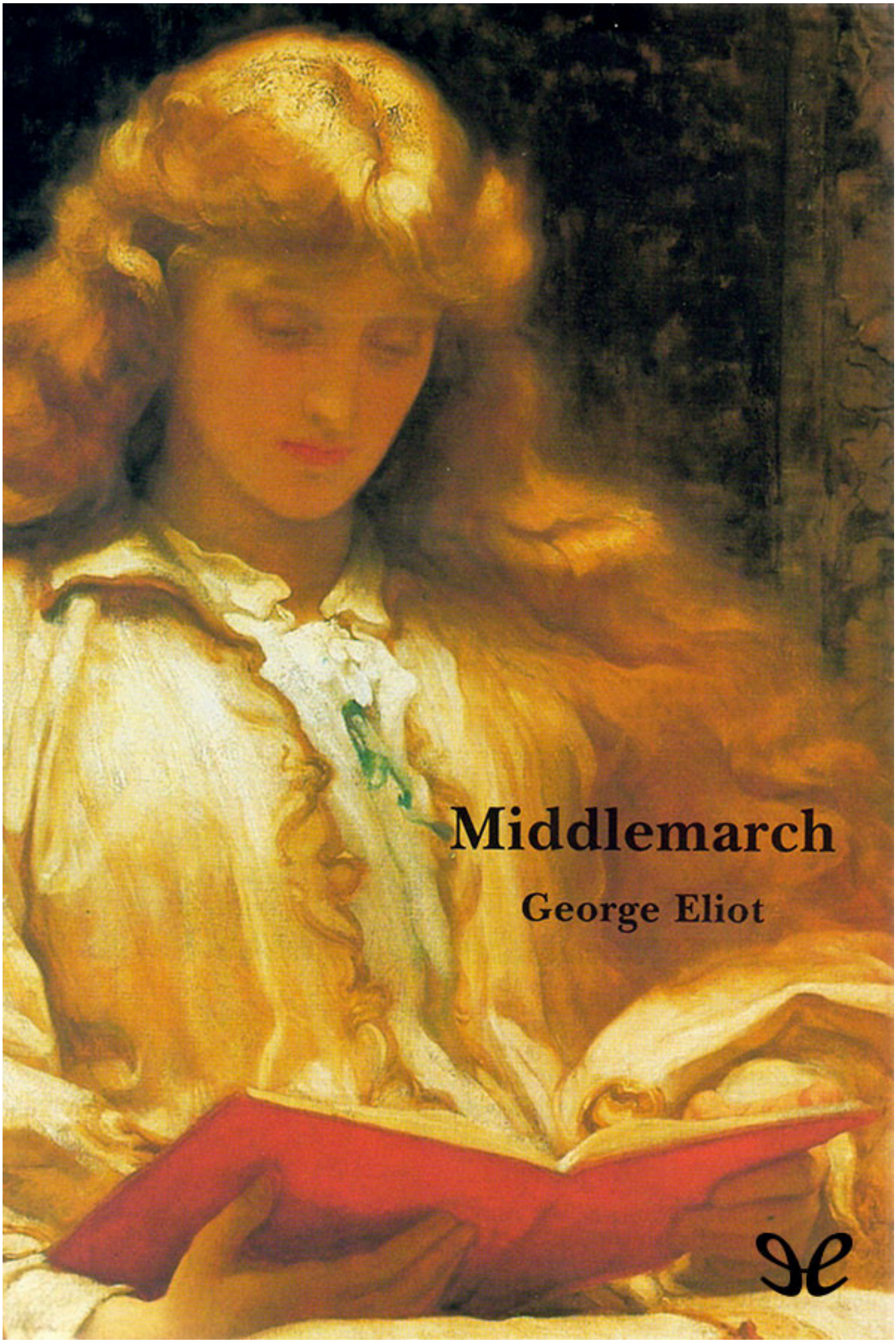
Her finely touched spirit had still its fine issues, though they were not widely visible. Her full nature, like that river of which Cyrus broke the strength, spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive, for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on un-historic acts, and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs.

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Middlemarch
George Eliot

Dorothea Brooke, a los diecinueve años, ha recibido «una educación para jovencitas comparable a las cavilaciones y opiniones de un ratón pensante», pero, activa e idealista, enamorada de un sesudo erudito en temas mitológicos, desea, «pobre criatura, ser sabia también ella». Con esa altitud de miras contrae matrimonio… y el matrimonio es un fracaso. Tertius Lydgate, por su parte, joven médico emprendedor, anhela convertir la provinciana ciudad de Middlemarch a la «cultura científica», desafiando prejuicios e implantando reformas: a la bella Rosamond Vincy el talento del joven le suena a «una condecoración en la solapa o un ilustrísimo delante del nombre» y está convencida de que casándose con él accederá a una gloriosa vida social. También su matrimonio es un fracaso. Y, en tercer término, Fred Vincy, el muchacho superfluo y sin vocación, y Mary Garth, la muchacha hacendosa y prudente, se gustan, se separan, se ponen a prueba y se vuelven a encontrar antes de consagrar ese vínculo al que solo la experiencia y la resistencia parecen garantizar la fortuna y la felicidad.

Middlemarch (1871-1872) es la historia de tres parejas sujetas a los frágiles hilos del saber y del error, entretejida con la crónica minuciosa de los destinos de toda una comunidad en una época de cambios y reacción. Quintaesencia de la novela victoriana, George Eliot marcó con ella un hito en la historia de la literatura universal.

George Eliot

Middlemarch

Un estudio de la vida en provincias

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Nota al texto

Middlemarch se publicó por primera vez en ocho volúmenes, de diciembre de 1871 a diciembre de 1872, fecha en la que apareció una nueva edición en cuatro. Fue editada posteriormente en 1874 en un solo volumen, oportunidad que aprovechó George Eliot para una completa revisión. El texto de esta edición revisada ha sido comúnmente el utilizado por los editores posteriores, y sobre él se basa la presente traducción.

Preludio

¿Quién, que se interese por conocer la historia del hombre y de cómo se comporta ese ser misterioso ante las diferentes probaturas del Tiempo, no se ha detenido —al menos brevemente— en la vida de santa Teresa? ¿Quién no ha sonreído con ternura al pensar en la niña que se echa a andar una mañana, llevando de la mano a su hermano aún más pequeño, buscando el martirio en tierra de moros? Juntos salieron de Ávila con pasos infantiles, los ojos muy abiertos y un aire tan indefenso como el de dos cervatillos, aunque también con corazones humanos, que ya latían por un ideal, hasta que la realidad doméstica se tropezó con ellos en forma de tíos y los hizo abandonar tan gran empresa. Aquella temprana peregrinación fue un buen comienzo. El temperamento apasionado e idealista de Teresa exigía una vida épica: ¿qué eran para ella las interminables novelas de caballerías y los éxitos sociales de una muchacha brillante? Su llama consumió en seguida combustible tan insuficiente y, alimentada desde dentro, se alzó en busca de alguna satisfacción sin límites, de algún objeto que descalificara para siempre el cansancio, que reconciliase la más completa autorrenuncia con una extática conciencia de la vida más allá del yo terreno. Teresa encontró su epopeya en la reforma de una orden religiosa.

Aquella española que vivió hace trescientos años no fue, desde luego, la última de su especie. Muchas Teresas nacidas después no han podido encontrar una vida épica que les ofreciera un constante despliegue de acciones con tan amplias resonancias; han vivido tan solo existencias llenas de errores, resultado de cierta grandeza espiritual mal emparejada con la escasez de oportunidades; se han quedado en trágicas fracasadas que no encontraron poeta capaz de inmortalizarlas, y se hundieron en el olvido sin nadie que las llorara. Con escasas luces y debatiéndose entre circunstancias complejas han tratado de lograr un noble acuerdo entre pensamiento y obra; pero, a fin de cuentas, para ojos indiferentes sus esfuerzos han sido incoherentes y amorfos; porque esas Teresas más recientes no han contado con la ayuda de un orden y una fe sociales de probada solidez capaces de suplir, para un alma de ardientes anhelos, la función del conocimiento. Su ardor se apoyaba tan pronto en un vago ideal como en los comunes anhelos de la feminidad; y así, unos criticaban el primero por extravagante mientras otros condenaban a los segundos calificándolos de deslices.

Hay quien ha pensado que esas vidas desafortunadas se deben a la inconveniente vaguedad con que el Supremo Hacedor modeló la naturaleza de las mujeres: si solo existiera un nivel de incompetencia femenina tan estricto como contar hasta tres y no hubiera que pasar de ahí, el puesto de la mujer en la sociedad podría determinarse con exactitud científica. Pero la vaguedad persiste, y la diversidad de posibilidades es mucho más amplia de lo que cabría deducir contemplando la similitud de los peinados femeninos y hasta de las historias de amor —tanto en prosa como en verso— que prefieren las mujeres. De cuando en cuando, rodeado de inquietud, crece, entre los patos del estanque, un cisne que nunca llega a la corriente de aguas vivas en compañía de los de su misma especie. De cuando en cuando nace una santa Teresa, fundadora de nada; los generosos impulsos con que trata de lograr una bondad inalcanzable sucumben y se dispersan entre múltiples obstáculos en lugar de hacer blanco en alguna meta claramente delineada.

Libro primero

La señorita Brooke

Capítulo I

Puesto que nada bueno puedo hacer por ser mujer
aspiro siempre a algo que lo parezca.

BEAUMONT y FLETCHER,
The Maid's Tragedy

La señorita Brooke poseía ese tipo de belleza que los vestidos más sencillos parecen poner de relieve. La delicadeza de sus manos y muñecas le permitía llevar mangas tan desprovistas de estilo como aquellas con que la Virgen María se aparecía a los pintores italianos; y su perfil, su figura y su porte se revestían de mayor dignidad en razón de sus trajes, que, por su contraste con las modas provincianas, le daban el empaque de una cita bíblica —o de un verso de nuestros poetas clásicos— en un párrafo de un periódico actual. Se decía de ella que su inteligencia era extraordinaria, pero con la apostilla de que su hermana Celia tenía más sentido común. Celia, sin embargo, se vestía casi con la misma austeridad, y solo los observadores muy atentos advertían que su ropa era diferente de la de su hermana y que no faltaba en su manera de arreglarse un leve toque de coquetería; porque la sencillez de la señorita Brooke en el vestir se debía a una mezcla de circunstancias, en su mayoría compartidas por Celia. El orgullo de ser señoras tenía algo que ver con ello: sus vínculos familiares, sin llegar a aristocráticos, eran incuestionablemente «buenos»; había que remontarse más de una o dos generaciones para encontrar comerciantes o tenderos entre sus antepasados: nada por debajo de un almirante o de un eclesiástico; cabía incluso que cierto miembro de la familia fuese un caballero puritano que guerreó a las órdenes de Cromwell y que, pese a modificar después sus actitudes religiosas, salió bien librado de todas las dificultades políticas y con un respetable patrimonio. Era lógico que señoritas con esa ascendencia, que vivían en una tranquila casa en el campo y acudían a una iglesia pueblerina apenas más amplia que un salón, considerasen la atracción por los perifollos algo acorde, más bien, con las ambiciones de la hija de un buhonero. Influía también un sentido del ahorro ligado a la buena educación; sentido del ahorro que, por aquel entonces, consideraba lógico renunciar a la ostentación en el vestir a favor de otros gastos más acordes con el rango social. Tales razones hubieran bastado para explicar la sencillez en el vestir sin necesidad de recurrir a los estímulos de la religión; pero en el caso de la señorita Brooke la religión por sí sola habría bastado para determinar su comportamiento; Celia, por su parte, aceptaba mansamente todas las opiniones de su hermana, limitándose a verter sobre ellas el sentido común que permite atacar doctrinas trascendentes sin un exceso de agitación. Dorothea se sabía de memoria muchos pasajes de los *Pensées* de Pascal y de Jeremy Taylor[1]; para ella el destino de los seres humanos, a la luz del cristianismo, convertía el interés excesivo por la moda femenina en ocupación digna de un manicomio, y no era capaz de reconciliar las ansiedades de una vida espiritual de consecuencias eternas con un gran interés por el tocado o las protuberancias artificiales en los vestidos. Dorothea tenía una inteligencia más teórica que práctica y, debido a su forma de ser, anhelaba compartir una grandiosa concepción del mundo que incluyera holgadamente la parroquia de Tipton y su regla personal de conducta; estaba enamorada de la intensidad y de la grandeza, y se lanzaba imprudentemente a abrazar cualquier cosa que le pareciera incluir aquellas cualidades; era muy capaz de buscar el martirio, de retractarse después y de sufrirlo al fin en un terreno totalmente ajeno a sus intenciones. No cabe duda de que la existencia de tales elementos en la personalidad de una muchacha en edad de merecer interfería en su suerte, impidiendo que su destino se decidiera, de acuerdo con la costumbre, en razón del atractivo físico, de la vanidad o de un afecto meramente canino. Hay que añadir a todo esto que Dorothea, la mayor de las

hermanas, no había cumplido aún los veinte años, y que las dos se habían educado desde los doce (siguiendo planes tan confusos como carentes de perspectiva) primero con una familia inglesa y después con otra suiza en Lausana, sistema con el que su tío y tutor trataba de remediar los inconvenientes de la orfandad.

Apenas había pasado un año desde que ambas vinieran a vivir a Tipton Grange con su tío, hombre muy cerca ya de los sesenta, contemporizador por naturaleza, de opiniones confusas, e imprevisible a la hora de votar. El señor Brooke había viajado en sus años mozos, y en aquella parte del condado se le consideraba con excesiva tendencia a divagar. Sus conclusiones eran tan difíciles de predecir como el tiempo: solo podía asegurarse que sus actos estarían presididos por una intención benevolente y que se esforzaría por gastar el menor dinero posible en realizarlos. Porque hasta los espíritus más amorfos encierran algunos pétreos nódulos de costumbre; y no es difícil comprobar cómo un hombre indiferente a sus propios intereses no quiere, de ninguna manera, desprenderse de su caja de rapé, y se convierte, cuando de ella se trata, en una persona vigilante, llena de sospechas y de codicia.

En el caso del señor Brooke la energía característica de la herencia puritana había quedado en suspenso; pero en su sobrina Dorothea se concretaba por igual en faltas y en virtudes que a veces se decantaban en impaciencia ante la manera de hablar de su tío o ante su tendencia a «no mover un dedo» en sus posesiones; esto hacía que anhelara el momento en que la mayoría de edad le permitiera disponer de algún dinero propio con que llevar a la práctica sus generosos proyectos. Se la consideraba un excelente partido, ya que no solo ambas hermanas tenían setecientas libras de renta anual heredadas de sus padres, sino que si Dorothea se casaba y tenía un hijo, ese hijo heredaría el patrimonio del señor Brooke, al que se atribuía un valor de tres mil libras anuales, renta capaz de deslumbrar a las familias provincianas, que aún seguían discutiendo la actitud recientemente adoptada por el señor Peel[2] en la cuestión católica, ignorantes de futuras minas de oro y de la espléndida plutocracia que tan noblemente ha exaltado después las necesidades de la vida elegante.

Pero ¿cómo imaginar que Dorothea no se casara? ¿Una muchacha tan bien parecida y con una situación económica tan desahogada? Nada podría impedirlo excepto su amor por lo extremoso y su insistencia en regular su vida de acuerdo con ideas que obligarían a un hombre cauteloso a sopesar cuidadosamente los inconvenientes de una propuesta matrimonial y que a ella incluso la llevarían en último extremo a rechazar a todos sus pretendientes. ¡Una señorita de buena familia y fortuna nada escasa que se arrodillaba de repente sobre un suelo de ladrillo al lado de un jornalero enfermo y rezaba fervorosamente como si creyera vivir en la época de los apóstoles! ¡Que tenía el extraño capricho de ayunar como una papista, y de quedarse levantada por la noche leyendo viejos libros de teología! Semejante esposa podría despertar cualquier hermosa mañana a su marido con un proyecto para la utilización de sus rentas de todo punto incompatible con la economía política y con el mantenimiento de caballos de recreo: lógicamente un hombre lo pensaría dos veces antes de arriesgarse a formar semejante asociación. Se daba por sentado que el parecer de las mujeres tenía muy poco peso, pero la gran salvaguarda de la sociedad y de la vida doméstica consistía en que las ideas no determinaban la conducta. Las personas en sus cabales se comportaban igual que sus vecinos, y así, si había algún loco suelto por la zona, siempre era posible enterarse y evitarlo.

La opinión local sobre las nuevas señoritas, incluidos los arrendatarios, se inclinaba a favor de Celia, por ser tan amable y de aspecto tan inocente, mientras que los grandes ojos de la señorita Brooke, al igual que sus convicciones religiosas, les parecían demasiado insólitos y llamativos. ¡Pobre Dorothea! Comparada con ella, Celia, a pesar de su aire inocente, era una persona experta y llena de sabiduría práctica; y es que una mente humana es algo mucho más sutil que la envoltura corpórea que le proporciona una especie de fachada o escudo de armas.

Sin embargo, quienes se acercaban a Dorothea, aunque predispuestos en contra por aquellos alarmantes rumores, descubrían que, de manera misteriosa y a pesar de todo, la señorita Brooke poseía un gran encanto. La mayoría de los hombres la encontraban seductora cuando montaba a caballo. A Dorothea le gustaban el aire libre y los cambiantes aspectos del paisaje, y cuando aquella mezcla de satisfacciones le encendía los ojos y las mejillas no parecía en absoluto una fanática religiosa. Montar a caballo era un capricho que se permitía a pesar de que le despertaba escrúpulos de conciencia: tenía la impresión de que era un placer pagano y sensual, y siempre se hacía el propósito de renunciar a ello.

La señorita Brooke era sincera, entusiasta y nada propensa a la vanidad; más aún, era admirable ver cómo adornaba mentalmente a su hermana Celia con atractivos muy superiores a los suyos y, si sospechaba que algún caballero no acudía a Tipton Grange con el exclusivo objeto de ver al señor Brooke, llegaba inmediatamente a la conclusión de que se había enamorado de Celia: tal era, por ejemplo, su actitud ante

sir James Chettam, a quien siempre consideraba desde el punto de vista de Celia, lo que le llevaba a debatir en su interior si su hermana haría bien aceptándolo por marido. Que alguien hubiera podido verlo como pretendiente suyo le habría parecido una incongruencia ridícula. Dorothea, pese a sus ansias de profundizar en el conocimiento de la vida, conservaba unas ideas muy infantiles sobre el matrimonio. Estaba convencida de que si hubiese nacido a tiempo para salvarlo del desastroso error que cometió al casarse, habría aceptado al juicioso Hooker[3]; o a John Milton en el momento de quedarse ciego; o a cualquiera de los otros grandes hombres de costumbres extrañas, ya que soportándolas habría dado pruebas de compasión excelsa; pero ¿casarse con un simpático y apuesto baronet que respondía a todas sus observaciones con un «muy cierto», incluso cuando eran una expresión de incertidumbre? ¿Cómo podría aceptarlo por compañero? En un matrimonio ideal el marido tenía que ser una especie de padre y estar incluso en condiciones de enseñar hebreo a su mujer, si es que ella así lo deseaba.

Aquellas peculiaridades del carácter de Dorothea contribuían a que las familias vecinas criticaran aun con más dureza al señor Brooke por no haber buscado una señora de cierta edad que sirviera a sus sobrinas de asesora y dama de compañía. Pero al bueno del señor Brooke le asustaba tanto el tipo de mujer llena de superioridad que casi con toda seguridad se presentaría para desempeñar aquella función, que se dejó convencer por las objeciones de Dorothea, y encontró en tal ocasión valentía suficiente para desafiar al mundo, es decir, a la señora Cadwallader, la esposa del rector, y al pequeño grupo de terratenientes del extremo nordeste del Loamshire con los que se trataba. De manera que la señorita Brooke llevaba la casa de su tío, y no le disgustaba en absoluto su nueva responsabilidad, ni el respeto que le manifestaban las personas a su cargo.

Aquel día sir James Chettam estaba invitado a cenar en casa del señor Brooke y vendría acompañado de otro caballero a quien las hermanas no habían visto nunca pero que ya inspiraba a Dorothea un sentimiento expectante de veneración. Se trataba del reverendo Edward Casaubon, conocido en toda la zona como persona de hondos saberes, empeñado desde hacía muchos años en una gran obra de historia religiosa, con fortuna suficiente para dar lustre a su piedad, y de opiniones personales cuyo peso sería posible conocer con mayor exactitud al publicarse su libro. La profunda impresión que causaba su nombre difícilmente podría medirse sin una precisa cronología de sus doctos trabajos.

Dorothea, de regreso a primera hora de la tarde de la escuela para niños que había organizado en el pueblo, se disponía a ocupar su sitio habitual en la agradable sala de estar que separaba los dormitorios de las dos hermanas, decidida a terminar los planos de unos edificios (un trabajo que le encantaba hacer), cuando Celia, que había estado contemplándola con el deseo de proponerle algo, pero sin atreverse del todo, dijo:

—Si no te importa y no estás demasiado ocupada, ¿podríamos ver las joyas de mamá, y repartirlas? Hoy hace precisamente seis meses que el tío te las dio, y ni siquiera las has mirado.

El rostro de Celia presentaba una expresión levemente compungida, que no llegaba a ser del todo un puchero gracias al temor reverente que le inspiraban de ordinario su hermana y los principios morales: dos hechos relacionados que podían producir una misteriosa descarga eléctrica si se los tocaba incautamente. Para su tranquilidad, los ojos de Dorothea sonreían abiertamente cuando levantó la vista.

—¡Qué almanaque tan maravilloso eres, Celia! ¿Seis meses de calendario o seis meses lunares?

—Hoy estamos a treinta de septiembre y el tío te las dio el primero de abril; dijo entonces, no sé si lo recuerdas, que las había olvidado por completo. Y creo que tú no has pensado en ellas desde que las guardaste en el armario.

—Tienes razón, pero lo cierto es que nunca las vamos a usar. —Dorothea hablaba con un tono muy cordial, mitad cariñoso, mitad aclaratorio. Seguía con el lápiz en la mano, haciendo diminutos planos adicionales en un margen.

Celia se ruborizó y su expresión se hizo solemne.

—Me parece que es una falta de respeto a la memoria de mamá guardarlas sin hacerles ningún caso. Y ahora —añadió después de una breve vacilación y manifestando con un principio de sollozo que se sentía humillada— los collares son una cosa muy normal; *madame* Poinçon, que en algunas cosas era incluso más estricta que tú, solía llevar adornos. Y los cristianos en general… Sin duda en este momento hay mujeres en el cielo que llevaban joyas. —Celia era consciente de poseer cierta capacidad razonadora cuando de verdad se esforzaba por tomar parte en una discusión.

—¿Te gustaría ponértelas? —exclamó Dorothea con aire de quien hace un descubrimiento asombroso, lo que dio animación dramática a toda su persona, gesto que había aprendido de aquella misma *madame* Poinçon que usaba joyas—. En ese caso tenemos que sacarlas, desde luego. ¿Por qué no me lo has dicho antes? Pero ¿y las llaves?, ¿dónde están las llaves? —Se apretó las sienes con las manos como si desesperase

de su memoria.

—Están aquí —dijo Celia, que había meditado sobre aquel diálogo y lo había ensayado muchas veces.

—Haz el favor de abrir el cajón grande del armario y de sacar el joyero.

La arqueta estuvo muy pronto abierta y las joyas extendidas sobre la mesa, semejantes a un resplandeciente ramo de flores. No se trataba de una colección excesivamente valiosa, pero algunas de las piezas eran en verdad muy hermosas y, a primera vista, las más destacadas resultaron ser un collar de amatistas, engarzadas en una exquisita filigrana de oro, y una cruz de nácar con cinco brillantes. Dorothea se apoderó inmediatamente del collar, colocándolo alrededor del cuello de su hermana, donde quedó casi tan ajustado como si se tratara de un brazalete; pero su circunferencia iba bien con la cabeza y el cuello de Celia, al estilo de Enriqueta María de Francia[4] y ella misma pudo comprobarlo acto seguido en el espejo de cuerpo entero situado en la pared frontal.

—¡Perfecto, Celia! Lo puedes llevar con tu vestido de muselina. Pero la cruz debes ponértela con trajes oscuros.

Celia trataba de ocultar una sonrisa de satisfacción.

—Pero Dodo, te tienes que quedar tú con la cruz.

—No, no, nada de eso —dijo Dorothea, alzando la mano en un despreocupado gesto de rechazo.

—Sí, claro que sí; te sentará muy bien… con tu traje negro —dijo Celia, dispuesta a no ceder—. Podrías llevarla perfectamente.

—Nada de eso, ni muchísimo menos. Por nada del mundo me pondría una cruz como si se tratara de un simple adorno —replicó Dorothea con un leve estremecimiento.

—Entonces te parecerá muy mal que la lleve yo —dijo Celia, intranquila.

—No, claro que no —respondió Dorothea, acariciando la mejilla de su hermana—. No todas las almas tienen la misma tonalidad de cutis: a algunas les favorece lo que a otras les sienta mal.

—Pero quizá quieras conservarla como recuerdo de mamá.

—No, ya tengo otras cosas suyas: la caja de madera de sándalo que tanto me gusta, y muchas cosas más. Las joyas son todas tuyas, querida. No hace falta que hablemos más de ello. Puedes llevártelas ya.

Celia se sintió un tanto herida. Había una buena dosis de superioridad en aquella condescendencia puritana, casi tan exasperante, para la delicada carne de una hermana menos extremosa, como una persecución puritana.

—Pero ¿cómo voy a ponerme yo adornos si tú, la hermana mayor, no vas a usarlos nunca?

—Vamos, Celia, es demasiado pedirme que lleve joyas para demostrarte mi aprobación. Si me pusiera un collar como ese tendría la impresión de estar haciendo piruetas. El mundo me daría vueltas y no sabría cómo andar.

Celia se había quitado ya la gargantilla.

—A ti te quedaría un poco apretada; algún colgante te sentará mejor —dijo bastante satisfecha. Que la joya resultara inservible para Dorothea hacía que la aceptara con mucho más agrado. En seguida abrió algunos estuches de sortijas, que dejaron al descubierto una hermosa esmeralda con brillantes, y precisamente en aquel momento el sol, saliendo de detrás de una nube, lanzó su resplandor sobre la mesa.

—¡Qué hermosas son estas piedras preciosas! —dijo Dorothea, dejándose llevar por una nueva corriente de sentimientos tan repentina como el brillo del sol—. Es extraño que los colores nos afecten tanto como si fueran aromas. Imagino que es esa la razón de que las gemas se usen como emblemas espirituales en el Apocalipsis de san Juan. Parecen fragmentos del paraíso. Creo que esa esmeralda es más hermosa que las otras joyas.

—Y hay una pulsera que hace juego —dijo Celia—. No nos habíamos dado cuenta al principio.

—Son preciosas —dijo Dorothea, introduciendo la sortija y el brazalete en un dedo y en una muñeca bellamente moldeados, y extendiéndolos hacia la ventana a la altura de los ojos. Mientras tanto su mente se esforzaba por justificar el placer que le producían los colores, incorporándolos a su alegría místico-religiosa.

—Esas te gustarían, Dorothea —dijo Celia, más bien vacilante, empezando a pensar con asombro que su hermana dejaba traslucir cierta debilidad y también que a ella misma las esmeraldas le sentarían mejor que las amatistas—. Tienes que quedarte al menos con la sortija y la pulsera. Pero, mira, estas ágatas son muy bonitas… y discretas.

—¡Sí! Me quedaré con estas: con la sortija y la pulsera —dijo Dorothea. Luego, dejando caer la mano sobre la mesa, añadió, cambiando de tono—: Sin embargo, ¡qué gentes tan desgraciadas son quienes encuentran estas piedras preciosas, las trabajan y las venden! —Hizo otra pausa y Celia pensó que su hermana iba a renunciar a las joyas, como debería hacerlo si fuera consecuente con sus ideas.

—Sí, me quedaré con ellas —dijo Dorothea, con tono decidido—. Pero llévate todas las demás, y

también la arqueta.

La señorita Brooke empuñó de nuevo el lápiz sin quitarse las joyas ni dejar de mirarlas. Pensó en tenerlas a mano con frecuencia para saciar sus ojos con aquellas diminutas fuentes de color.

—¿Te las pondrás cuando tengamos invitados? —dijo Celia, muy intrigada por el futuro comportamiento de su hermana.

Dorothea se volvió un instante para mirarla. Aunque de manera natural atribuía siempre virtudes imaginarias a las personas que amaba, de cuando en cuando surgían en ella chispazos de agudo discernimiento no desprovistos de mordacidad. Si la señorita Brooke llegaba alguna vez a alcanzar la mansedumbre perfecta no sería por falta de fuego interior.

—Quizá —dijo con entonación altiva—. ¡Quién sabe lo bajo que puedo llegar a caer!

Celia se ruborizó y se sintió desgraciada; vio que había ofendido a su hermana y no se atrevió siquiera a decir algo agradable sobre el regalo; se limitó a guardar otra vez las joyas en la arqueta y a llevárselas. Dorothea también se sintió desgraciada mientras continuaba con su proyecto, poniendo en duda la pureza de sus sentimientos y de sus palabras durante la escena que había concluido con aquella pequeña explosión temperamental.

A Celia su conciencia le decía que no se había comportado mal: era natural y estaba perfectamente justificado que hiciera la pregunta, y se repitió a sí misma que Dorothea era poco consecuente; debía haber aceptado la parte de las joyas que le correspondía o, después de haber dicho lo que había dicho, renunciar a todas.

«Estoy segura… por lo menos, confío —pensó Celia— en que llevar una gargantilla no suponga un obstáculo para mis oraciones. Y no creo que tenga que sentirme obligada por las ideas de Dodo ahora que empezamos a hacer vida social, aunque, por supuesto, mi hermana sí que debería obrar de acuerdo con ellas. Pero Dorothea no siempre es consecuente».

Así pensaba Celia, inclinada en silencio sobre su bordado hasta que oyó a su hermana llamándola.

—Ven, Kitty, mira mi proyecto; creeré que soy un gran arquitecto si consigo que escaleras y chimeneas no resulten incompatibles.

Mientras Celia se inclinaba sobre el papel, Dorothea acarició con la mejilla el brazo de su hermana. Celia entendió el significado de aquel gesto. Dorothea se arrepentía de haber obrado mal, y Celia la perdonó. Hasta donde alcanzaba su memoria común, siempre había existido una mezcla de crítica y de temor reverente en la actitud de Celia hacia su hermana mayor. La pequeña soportaba el yugo; pero ¿existe alguna criatura sometida al yugo que carezca de opiniones personales?

Capítulo II

—Dime, ¿no ves aquel caballero que hacia nosotros viene, sobre un caballo rucio rodado, que trae puesto en la cabeza un yelmo de oro?

—Lo que yo veo y columbro —respondió Sancho— no es sino un hombre sobre un asno, pardo como el mío, que trae sobre la cabeza una cosa que relumbra.

—Pues ese es el yelmo de Mambrino —dijo don Quijote.

CERVANTES

—¿Sir Humphry Davy[5]? —dijo el señor Brooke mientras tomaban la sopa, sonriente, con su aire cordial característico, en respuesta a la observación de sir James Chettam, que estaba estudiando *Agricultura química*—. Sí, claro, sir Humphry Davy; cené con él hace años en casa de Cartwright, y Wordsworth también estaba allí… el poeta, ya saben. Eso sí que es curioso. Estudié en Cambridge en la misma época que Wordsworth y nunca me tropecé con él… pero cenamos juntos veinte años más tarde en casa de Cartwright. Pasan cosas muy extrañas, no cabe duda. Pero Davy estaba allí; también era poeta. O, debiera decir, Wordsworth era el poeta número uno y Davy el número dos. Eso era verdad en todos los sentidos, se lo aseguro.

Dorothea se sentía un poco más incómoda que de costumbre. Al comienzo de la cena, con tan pocos invitados y en una habitación tan silenciosa, aquellas partículas procedentes de la masa mental de un magistrado tan peculiar como su tío caían sobre la reunión de manera demasiado visible. La señorita Brooke se preguntó qué tal soportaría tanta trivialidad un hombre de la talla del señor Casaubon. Sus modales, pensó, estaban llenos de dignidad; los cabellos grises y los ojos hundidos en las órbitas le hacían parecerse al retrato de Locke. Tenía la figura enjuta y la tez pálida que corresponden a un estudioso, y lograba un contraste absoluto con el prototipo de inglés saludable de patillas rojas que era sir James Chettam.

—Estoy leyendo *Elementos de la agricultura química* —dijo aquel excelente caballero—, porque voy a ocuparme personalmente de una de mis granjas para ver si es posible mejorar los métodos de cultivo que utilizan los arrendatarios. ¿Le parece a usted bien, señorita Brooke?

—Es un gran error, Chettam —intervino el señor Brooke—, dedicarse a electrificar[6] las tierras y cosas por el estilo, convirtiendo el establo en un salón. No saldrá bien. Yo me dediqué mucho a la ciencia en una ocasión, pero me di cuenta de que no saldría bien. Complica demasiado las cosas; después hay que cambiarlo todo. No, no… Preocúpese de que sus arrendatarios no vendan la paja y cosas así, deles material para hacer desagües, ya sabe. Pero su agricultura experimental no dará buenos resultados… Es el capricho más caro que se le puede ocurrir; le costaría lo mismo mantener una jauría.

—Sin duda —dijo Dorothea— es mejor gastar dinero en descubrir cómo los seres humanos pueden sacar más partido de la tierra que les da el sustento, que en criar perros y caballos que solo sirven para galopar por su superficie. No es pecado empobrecerse realizando experimentos en bien de la comunidad.

La señorita Brooke habló con más energía de la que se espera de una señorita tan joven, pero sir James había solicitado su opinión. Estaba acostumbrado a hacerlo así, y Dorothea pensaba con frecuencia que podría impulsarlo a realizar muchas buenas acciones cuando fuese su cuñado.

Mientras hablaba, el señor Casaubon volvió la vista hacia la señorita Brooke de manera perceptible, y pareció fijarse en ella por vez primera.

—Las jovencitas no entienden de economía política, ya se sabe —dijo el señor Brooke, sonriendo al

señor Casaubon—. Me acuerdo de cuando todos leíamos a Adam Smith. Ese sí que es un libro importante. Hubo una época en que yo aceptaba todas las nuevas ideas… la perfectibilidad humana, vamos. Pero algunos dicen que la historia se mueve en círculos, y es una teoría que se defiende muy bien; yo mismo lo he hecho. Lo cierto es que la razón humana lo puede llevar a uno demasiado lejos: puede incluso tirarlo por encima de la cerca, por así decirlo. A mí me arrastró un gran trecho en cierta ocasión, pero me di cuenta de que no obtendría buenos resultados. Tiré de las riendas; tiré de las riendas a tiempo. Pero sin excesiva violencia. Siempre he estado a favor de un poco de teoría; de lo contrario volveríamos al oscurantismo. Pero hablando de libros, ahí está la *Guerra de Sucesión en España*, de Southey. Lo leo por las mañanas. ¿Conoce usted a Southey?

—No —dijo el señor Casaubon, perdiendo el hilo de las impetuosas razones del señor Brooke y pensando solo en el libro—. No tengo tiempo para ese tipo de literatura en estos momentos. Últimamente me he gastado la vista con viejos manuscritos; lo cierto es que necesito un lector para las veladas, pero soy muy exigente en cuestión de voces y no soporto escuchar a alguien que lea mal. Es una desgracia, en cierto sentido: me alimento demasiado de fuentes interiores; vivo demasiado con los muertos. Mi entendimiento es algo así como el fantasma de un hombre de tiempos pretéritos que vagara por el mundo tratando de reconstruirlo mentalmente tal como era, a pesar de la destrucción y de los cambios que todo lo mezclan. Pero tengo que tomar muchas precauciones con la vista.

Era la primera vez que el señor Casaubon hablaba con cierta amplitud. Se expresaba con la claridad de alguien a quien se le ha pedido hacer una declaración pública; y la equilibrada y uniforme pulcritud de su manera de hablar, subrayada en ocasiones por un movimiento de cabeza, resultaba más llamativa por el contraste con el desaliño incoherente del bueno del señor Brooke. Dorothea se dijo para sus adentros que el señor Casaubon era el hombre más interesante que había visto nunca, sin exceptuar siquiera a *monsieur* Liret, el clérigo del cantón de Vaud que les había dado conferencias sobre la historia de los valdenses. Reconstruir un mundo pasado, con vistas sin duda a una mayor profundización en la verdad… ¡qué maravilla participar de algún modo, el que fuera, en una ocupación así, y ayudar, aunque solo fuera sosteniendo una lámpara! Aquella idea jubilosa la elevó por encima del enojo que le producía que se la tomara a broma por su ignorancia sobre la economía política, ciencia nunca explicada que se arrojaba como un cubo de agua fría sobre todos sus talentos.

—Pero a usted le gusta montar a caballo, señorita Brooke —tuvo muy pronto oportunidad de decir sir James—. Siempre he pensado que acabaría aficionándose un poco al placer de la caza. Quisiera que me permitiese enviarle un caballo zaino para que lo pruebe. Ha sido educado para que lo monte una dama. El sábado la vi galopando en un jamelgo indigno de usted. Mi mozo le traerá a *Corydon* todos los días en cuanto me diga a qué hora lo desea.

—Gracias; es usted muy amable. Pero estoy decidida a renunciar a montar a caballo. No volveré a hacerlo nunca más —dijo Dorothea, empujada a aquella brusca resolución por la leve incomodidad de que sir James reclamara su atención cuando ella quería dedicarla por entero al señor Casaubon.

—No, eso es demasiado duro —dijo sir James con un tono de reproche que demostraba un gran interés —. Su hermana es partidaria de la mortificación, ¿no es cierto? —continuó, volviéndose hacia Celia, sentada a su derecha.

—Creo que sí —respondió Celia, temerosa de decir algo que pudiera disgustar a Dorothea, y sonrojándose de la manera más encantadora por encima del collar de amatistas—. Le gusta renunciar a las cosas.

—Si eso fuera cierto, Celia, mis renuncias no serían más que autocomplacencia, no mortificación. Pero quizá haya buenas razones para no hacer algo que resulta muy agradable —dijo Dorothea.

El señor Brooke estaba hablando al mismo tiempo, pero era evidente que el señor Casaubon observaba a Dorothea, y que ella se daba cuenta.

—Muy cierto —dijo sir James—. Usted renuncia por algún generoso motivo más elevado.

—De ninguna manera; no es así exactamente. Yo no he dicho eso de mí misma —respondió Dorothea, poniéndose colorada. A diferencia de Celia, se ruborizaba muy pocas veces, y solo cuando sentía una indignación o una alegría intensas. En aquel momento estaba muy enfadada por la perversidad de sir James. ¿Por qué no se ocupaba de Celia y dejaba que ella escuchara al señor Casaubon? Si por lo menos aquel hombre sabio hablara en lugar de ceder la palabra al señor Brooke, quien en aquel momento le estaba informado de que la Reforma, o bien significaba algo o por el contrario no significaba nada, y que él mismo era protestante hasta la médula, pero que el catolicismo era un hecho; y en cuanto a negarse a ceder un acre de la propia tierra para que los adeptos a Roma construyeran una capilla, todos los hombres necesitaban el freno de la religión, lo que, hablando propiamente, era miedo al más allá.

—En una ocasión estudié mucha teología —dijo el señor Brooke, para explicar las reflexiones que acababa de hacer—. Sé algo de todas las escuelas. Conocí a Wilberforce en sus mejores días. ¿Conoce usted a Wilberforce[7]?

—No —respondió el señor Casaubon.

—Bueno, quizá Wilberforce no fuera un gran pensador; pero si yo fuera al Parlamento, como se me ha pedido que haga, me sentaría en el banco de los independientes, igual que Wilberforce, para dedicarme a la filantropía.

El señor Casaubon hizo una inclinación de cabeza y comentó que se trataba de un campo muy amplio.

—Sí —dijo el señor Brooke con una sonrisa desenvuelta—, pero tengo documentos. Empecé a reunirlos hace mucho tiempo. Hay que ordenarlos, pero, cuando un problema me interesaba, escribía a alguien y obtenía una respuesta. Tengo documentos para respaldarme. Pero, dígame, ¿cómo ordena usted sus documentos?

—Mediante casilleros, en parte —respondió el señor Casaubon, con aire más bien sorprendido y considerable dificultad.

—¡Ah!, los casilleros no sirven. Lo he intentado, pero en los casilleros se mezcla todo: nunca sé si un papel está en la A o en la Z.

—Me gustaría que me dejaras ordenar tus papeles, tío —dijo Dorothea—. Les pondría rótulo a todos y haría una lista de temas con cada letra.

El señor Casaubon sonrió en señal de aprobación con mucha gravedad y dijo al señor Brooke:

—No sé si se da usted cuenta de que tiene a mano una excelente secretaria.

—No, no —dijo el señor Brooke, agitando la cabeza—; no puedo permitir que una joven revuelva mis documentos. Las muchachas son demasiado veleidosas.

Dorothea se sintió herida. El señor Casaubon iba a creer que su tío tenía alguna razón especial para hablar así, aunque en realidad aquel comentario descansaba en su cabeza, entre todos los demás fragmentos allí presentes, con tan poco peso como el ala rota de un insecto, y una fortuita corriente de aire había hecho que se posara sobre Dorothea.

Cuando las dos muchachas se quedaron solas, Celia dijo:

—¡Qué feo es el señor Casaubon!

—¡Celia! Es uno de los hombres de aspecto más distinguido que he visto en mi vida. Se parece muchísimo al retrato de Locke. Tiene los mismos ojos hundidos.

—¿Tenía Locke esas dos verrugas blancas con pelo por encima?

—Imagino que sí, cuando determinadas personas lo miraban —respondió Dorothea alejándose un poco.

—El señor Casaubon está muy pálido.

—Tanto mejor. Supongo que tú admiras a un hombre con la piel tan rosada como la de un cochinillo.

—¡Dodo! —exclamó Celia, mirándola sorprendida—. No te había oído nunca hacer esa comparación.

—¿Por qué habría tenido que hacerla antes de que llegase la ocasión? Es una buena comparación: el parecido es perfecto.

La señorita Brooke se estaba propasando, sin duda alguna, y eso fue lo que pensó Celia.

—Me pregunto por qué estás de tan mal humor, Dorothea.

—Es muy penoso que tú, Celia, mires a los seres humanos como si fueran simples animales correctamente vestidos, sin ver nunca la grandeza de alma en su rostro.

—¿Es que el señor Casaubon tiene un alma grande? —A Celia no le faltaba en ocasiones un toque de ingenua malicia.

—Sí, estoy segura de que la tiene —dijo Dorothea con voz muy firme—. Todo lo que veo en él está de acuerdo con su folleto sobre la cosmología bíblica.

—Habla muy poco —dijo Celia.

—No tiene a nadie con quien hablar.

Celia pensó: «Dorothea desprecia a sir James Chettam; creo que no lo aceptará por marido». A Celia, que nunca había interpretado mal las intenciones del baronet, le parecía una lástima que fuese así. A veces, sin embargo, se le ocurría que quizá Dodo hiciese desgraciado a un marido que no tuviera su misma manera de ver las cosas y, relegada a lo más hondo de su corazón, estaba la idea de que su hermana era demasiado religiosa para el bienestar de una familia. Las creencias y los escrúpulos eran como agujas rotas y hacían que una tuviera miedo de pisar o de sentarse, o incluso de comer.

Cuando la señorita Brooke tomaba el té, sir James fue a sentarse a su lado, ya que no había juzgado ofensiva su forma de responderle. ¿Por qué tendría que hacerlo? Le parecía probable que la señorita Brooke se sintiese atraída hacia él, y las actitudes han de subrayarse mucho para que dejen de interpretarse de

acuerdo con ideas preconcebidas, tanto a favor como en contra. Sir James encontraba encantadora a Dorothea, pero, como es lógico, teorizaba un poco acerca del afecto que le inspiraba. Estaba hecho de excelentes materiales humanos y tenía el mérito poco frecuente de saber que sus talentos, aun dejándolos correr, no harían que se desbordara ni el curso de agua más modesto del condado: de ahí que le agradase la idea de una esposa a la que pudiera decir: «¿Qué te parece que hagamos?» acerca de esto y de lo de más allá; que pudiera ayudar a su marido con razones y que, para hacerlo, cumpliera con el requisito de ser también terrateniente. En cuanto al exceso de religiosidad que se achacaba a la señorita Brooke, sir James tenía ideas muy vagas sobre su naturaleza y pensaba que desaparecería con el matrimonio. En resumen, creía estar enamorado de la persona adecuada y se hallaba dispuesto a dejarse avasallar en gran medida, sabiendo que, después de todo, el varón siempre está en condiciones de imponerse cuando lo desea. A sir James no se le ocurría que fuese nunca a sentir deseos de bajarle los humos a aquella muchacha tan bien parecida, cuya inteligencia tanto le agradaba. ¿Por qué no? La capacidad mental de un hombre —en el grado en que exista— siempre tiene la ventaja de ser varonil, de la misma manera que el abedul más pequeño es de una especie más noble que la más alta de las palmeras y hasta su ignorancia disfruta de mayor solidez. Quizá sir James no hubiera sido capaz de dar forma por sí solo a esta apreciación, pero cierto tipo de Providencia proporciona incluso a la personalidad más caótica un poco de almidón o aglutinante en forma de tradición.

—Concédame la esperanza de que cambiará usted de idea acerca del caballo, señorita Brooke —dijo aquel perseverante admirador—. Le aseguro que montar es el más saludable de los ejercicios.

—Me doy cuenta de ello —dijo Dorothea con gran frialdad—. Creo que sería muy beneficioso para Celia… si se aficionara.

—Pero usted es una extraordinaria amazona.

—Perdóneme; he practicado muy poco y el caballo me derribaría en seguida.

—Esa es una buena razón para practicar más. Todas las damas deben ser excelentes amazonas para poder acompañar a sus maridos.

—Ya ve usted hasta qué punto discrepamos, sir James. Yo he decidido que no debo ser una excelente amazona y por tanto no me ajustaré nunca a su ideal femenino. —Dorothea miraba al frente y hablaba con brusquedad, como si fuera un muchacho, en divertido contraste con la solícita amabilidad de su admirador.

—Me gustaría conocer las razones de esa cruel resolución. No es posible que la equitación le parezca inconveniente.

—Es muy posible que la considere impropia en mi caso.

—Pero ¿por qué? —preguntó sir James con tierno tono de reproche.

El señor Casaubon se había acercado a la mesa con una taza de té en la mano y estaba escuchando.

—No debemos mostrar demasiada curiosidad por los motivos —dijo con su mesura habitual—. La señorita Brooke sabe que al sacarlos a la luz es fácil que pierdan fuerza: el aroma se mezcla con aire de peor calidad. Hay que mantener alejado de la luz el grano que germina.

Dorothea se ruborizó de placer y miró agradecida al señor Casaubon, un hombre capaz de entender la vida interior más elevada y con quien podía llegarse a una comunicación espiritual; más aún, capaz de iluminar los principios morales con una gran amplitud de conocimientos: ¡un hombre cuyo saber casi alcanzaba a convertirse en prueba de aquello en lo que creía!

Quizá las conclusiones de Dorothea parezcan demasiado generosas; pero, en realidad, la vida no hubiese seguido adelante en ningún período sin esa gran tolerancia en las deducciones que ha facilitado el matrimonio a pesar de las dificultades de la civilización. ¿Es que alguien ha comprimido alguna vez, hasta reducirla a una diminuta masa sólida, la telaraña de las relaciones que se crean durante el noviazgo?

—Por supuesto —dijo el bueno de sir James—. No seré yo quien apremie a la señorita Brooke para que dé razones sobre las que prefiera guardar silencio. Estoy convencido de que sus motivos la honrarán siempre.

No se sentía en lo más mínimo celoso por el interés con que Dorothea había mirado al señor Casaubon: nunca se le ocurriría que una muchacha a la que pensaba pedir en matrimonio se interesara por un apergaminado ratón de biblioteca próximo a los cincuenta, excepto, claro está, en un sentido de algún modo religioso, como en el caso de un eclesiástico de cierto renombre.

Sin embargo, dado que la señorita Brooke inició en seguida una conversación con el señor Casaubon sobre el clero valdense, sir James se acercó a Celia para hablarle de su hermana; hizo referencia a su casa en la ciudad y preguntó si a la señorita Brooke le desagradaba Londres. Ausente su hermana, Celia hablaba con fluidez y sir James se dijo que la segunda señorita Brooke era sin duda muy simpática, además de bonita, aunque no —como algunas personas pretendían— más inteligente y sensata que su hermana mayor.

Tuvo el convencimiento de que había escogido a la que era superior en todos los sentidos, y a un hombre le gusta, como es lógico, abrigar la esperanza de poseer lo mejor. Quien fingiera lo contrario sería el más hipócrita de los solteros.

Capítulo III

Narra, oh diosa, lo que aconteció, cuando Rafael,
el gentil arcángel…
Eva
la historia oyó atentamente,
admirada y sumida en profundas reflexiones, al escuchar
cosas tan elevadas y extrañas.

Paraíso perdido, libro VII

Si al señor Casaubon se le había ocurrido pensar en la señorita Brooke como esposa conveniente, hay que decir, por otra parte, que las razones que podían inducir a Dorothea a aceptarlo como marido estaban ya sembradas en su mente y que, al llegar la noche del día siguiente, habían germinado y florecido. Y es que los dos mantuvieron una larga conversación por la mañana, mientras Celia, a quien no agradaba la compañía de las verrugas y de la palidez del señor Casaubon, se escapaba para ir a jugar con los hijos del vicario de Tipton, desastrados pero alegres.

Para entonces Dorothea había examinado a fondo el inconmensurable depósito de conocimientos que albergaba la mente del señor Casaubon, viendo reflejadas allí, en laberínticas proporciones, todas las cualidades que ella misma aportaba; había hecho partícipe de gran parte de sus propias experiencias al erudito clérigo; y captado, gracias a sus explicaciones, el alcance de su gran obra, de una extensión también laberínticamente atractiva. Porque el señor Casaubon se mostró tan deseoso de instruir como el «afable arcángel» de Milton y, con modales también algo arcangélicos, explicó a Dorothea cómo se había propuesto demostrar (lo que, por supuesto, ya se había intentado con anterioridad, pero nunca con la minuciosidad, imparcialidad en las comparaciones y eficacia en la disposición a que aspiraba él) que todos los sistemas míticos, o fragmentos míticos desgajados, eran degeneraciones de una tradición revelada en sus orígenes. Establecida la doctrina verdadera, el amplio campo de las construcciones míticas, firmemente asentado en ella, resultaba inteligible, más aún, luminoso, con la luz reflejada de sus vínculos con la revelación. Pero recoger aquella gran cosecha de verdades no era trabajo fácil ni rápido. Las notas del señor Casaubon constituían ya una formidable hilera de volúmenes, y la tarea que coronaría tan singular esfuerzo sería condensar aquellos extensos resultados, que aún seguían acumulándose, para obligarlos a ocupar, como la primera cosecha de libros hipocráticos, tan solo una estantería de reducidas dimensiones. Al explicar todo aquello a Dorothea, el señor Casaubon se expresaba casi como lo hubiese hecho con uno de sus colegas en la erudición, porque no disponía de dos maneras distintas de hablar; es cierto que cuando usaba una frase griega o latina daba siempre la traducción inglesa con escrupuloso cuidado, pero eso, probablemente, lo hubiera hecho también en cualquier otro caso. Todo sabio clérigo provinciano está acostumbrado a pensar que las personas que conoce son «señores, caballeros y hombres nobles y muy dignos, pero poco duchos en latín»[8].

Dorothea se sintió completamente cautivada por las amplias perspectivas de aquel proyecto. Estaba en presencia de algo que llegaba más allá de las trivialidades literarias que se aprenden en los internados para señoritas; en presencia de un Bossuet de carne y hueso, cuya obra reconciliaría el saber total con la piedad más devota; de un moderno Agustín que era a un tiempo doctor y santo.

La santidad del señor Casaubon no le parecía menos evidente que su sabiduría, porque, cuando Dorothea se sintió impulsada a revelarle sus ideas sobre ciertos temas de los que no podía hablar con

ninguna de las personas que había conocido hasta entonces en Tipton, y en especial sobre la escasa importancia de las formas eclesiásticas y de los artículos de la fe comparados con la religión espiritual, con la inmersión del propio yo en la comunión con la perfección divina que a ella le parecía expresada en los mejores libros cristianos de épocas muy distantes entre sí, encontró en el señor Casaubon un oyente que la entendió de inmediato, y que se apresuró a manifestar su acuerdo con aquel punto de vista, siempre que estuviera moderado por un prudente acatamiento de lo establecido, mencionando además ejemplos históricos que Dorothea desconocía hasta aquel momento.

«Piensa como yo —se dijo Dorothea—, o más bien, abarca un mundo entero del que mis ideas no son más que un reflejo insignificante. Y no hay que olvidar sus sentimientos, toda su experiencia… ¡qué lago, comparado con mi pequeña alberca!».

La señorita Brooke, a partir de palabras e intenciones, sacaba conclusiones con la misma decisión que otras jovencitas de su edad. Los signos son cosas pequeñas y mensurables, pero las interpretaciones carecen de límites y, para las muchachas de naturaleza dulce y ardiente, cualquier signo es capaz de suscitar un asombro, una esperanza y una fe tan vastos como el cielo, y coloreados por una diluida pizca de sustancia con pretensiones de conocimiento. Pero no siempre se equivocan por completo: el mismo Simbad, con un poco de suerte, pudo incurrir en alguna descripción veraz, y falsos razonamientos sirven a veces para que los pobres mortales saquemos conclusiones ciertas: empezando muy lejos del punto debido y avanzando por medio de vueltas y zigzags, de cuando en cuando llegamos exactamente al sitio donde deberíamos estar. Que la señorita Brooke se precipitara al dar su confianza no prueba que el señor Casaubon fuese indigno de ella.

El invitado se quedó un poco más de lo que pensaba, sin otra presión que la insistencia del señor Brooke, quien tan solo le ofreció como cebo sus propios documentos sobre destrucción de máquinas e incendios en almiares[9]. El señor Casaubon se vio convocado a la biblioteca para contemplar aquellos escritos apilados, mientras su anfitrión cogía primero uno y luego otro y leía en voz alta de forma fragmentaria e indecisa, pasando de un párrafo incompleto a otro con un «sí, bueno, pero… ¡aquí, aquí!», para terminar apartándolos todos y abriendo el diario de sus viajes juveniles por Europa.

—Mire aquí… aquí está todo sobre Grecia. Ramnunto, las ruinas de Ramnunto… usted es un gran especialista en Grecia. No sé si ha estudiado usted la topografía. Yo me pasé muchísimo tiempo haciendo estas cosas… Helicón, veamos. ¡Mire, aquí! «A la mañana siguiente emprendimos la marcha hacia el monte Parnaso con sus dos cimas». Todo este volumen trata sobre Grecia, ¿sabe? —concluyó el señor Brooke, frotando el borde de las hojas con el pulgar mientras mostraba el libro.

El señor Casaubon, que desempeñaba el papel de público con dignidad pero con aire algo melancólico, hacía inclinaciones de cabeza en los momentos oportunos y evitaba, dentro de lo posible, mirar los documentos, sin mostrarse desconsiderado ni impaciente y sin perder de vista que la incoherencia del señor Brooke iba asociada con las instituciones del país y que la persona que le estaba guiando en aquel difícil correteo mental no era solo anfitrión afectuoso, sino terrateniente y *custos rotulorum*[10]. ¿Contribuía a su actitud paciente la reflexión de que el señor Brooke era tío de Dorothea?

Desde luego el señor Casaubon parecía cada vez más dispuesto a que la señorita Brooke hablara con él, a que le hiciera confidencias, como la misma Celia no pudo por menos de advertir; y al mirarla, el rostro del sabio eclesiástico quedaba con frecuencia iluminado por una sonrisa que era como un pálido rayo de sol invernal. Antes de marcharse a la mañana siguiente, mientras daba un agradable paseo con la señorita Brooke por el jardín, el señor Casaubon mencionó que no era insensible a los inconvenientes de la soledad, que echaba de menos la alegre camaradería con que la presencia de la juventud alivia o da mayor variedad a los serios afanes de la edad madura. E hizo esta afirmación con el cuidado meticuloso de un diplomático que espera cosechar con sus palabras resultados inmediatos. De hecho, el señor Casaubon no estaba habituado a tener que repetir o revisar sus manifestaciones de carácter práctico o personal. Para referirse a las inclinaciones pausadamente expuestas el 2 de octubre, consideraría suficiente la mención de aquella fecha, guiándose para ello de la eficacia de su propia memoria, que era un volumen en el que bastaba un *vide supra*, sin necesidad de repeticiones, en lugar del típico papel secante muchas veces usado que solo conserva restos de escritos olvidados. Pero en este caso la confianza del señor Casaubon no era probable que se viera defraudada, porque Dorothea escuchaba y retenía sus palabras con todo el interés de una criatura joven e inocente para quien cualquier nueva experiencia es un acontecimiento.

Eran las tres de la tarde de un hermoso día de otoño cuando el señor Casaubon se puso en camino hacia su rectoría de Lowick, tan solo a ocho kilómetros de Tipton; y Dorothea, que llevaba puestos el sombrero y el chal, se apresuró a cruzar el jardín y el parque para poder pasear por el cercano bosque sin otra compañía que la de Monk, el san bernardo que siempre cuidaba de las hermanas durante sus paseos. Ante

su imaginación juvenil tomaba forma la visión de un posible futuro lleno de temblorosas esperanzas, y quería adentrarse por aquel horizonte visionario sin sufrir interrupciones. Anduvo con paso rápido respirando el aire estimulante, y pronto sus mejillas se encendieron y el sombrero de paja que llevaba (y que nuestros contemporáneos, al contemplarlo con curiosidad, hubieran identificado con un cesto de forma anticuada) se inclinó un tanto hacia atrás. Quizá no quedase suficientemente caracterizada si se omitiera decir que llevaba el cabello en trenzas y recogido por detrás, mostrando la silueta de la cabeza de manera atrevida en una época en que la costumbre requería que la escasez natural se disimulara con altas barricadas de encrespados rizos y lazos, nunca sobrepasados por ninguna raza con excepción de la melanesia. Era aquel uno de los rasgos del ascetismo de la señorita Brooke, aunque mientras miraba sin ver, pero transformando en estado de ánimo la gloria solemne de la tarde, con sus largas franjas de luz entre las interminables hileras de tilos, cuyas sombras se tocaban, la expresión de sus ojos, muy abiertos y brillantes, nada tenía de ascética.

Todo el mundo, jóvenes y viejos (es decir, todas las personas de tiempos anteriores a la Reforma), habrían considerado a Dorothea un objeto lleno de interés si hubieran podido relacionar el brillo de sus ojos y el color de sus mejillas con las imágenes habituales de un reciente amor juvenil: las ilusiones de Cloe acerca de Estrefón[11] han quedado suficientemente consagradas en la poesía, como corresponde al patético encanto de toda confianza espontánea. La adoración de la señorita Pippin por el joven Pumpkin y su ensueño de interminables horizontes de unión perseverante eran un drama de modestas proporciones del que nuestros padres y madres nunca se cansaban y que había sido representado con los ropajes más diversos. Bastará con que Pumpkin tenga una figura que resista los inconvenientes del frac de talle alto y todo el mundo considerará no solo natural, sino hasta necesario, que para poner de manifiesto las cimas más altas de la feminidad una dulce jovencita quede al instante convencida de su virtud, de sus dotes excepcionales y, sobre todo, de su total sinceridad. Pero quizá ninguna de las personas vivas por aquel entonces —con seguridad, ninguna de las que vivían en las proximidades de Tipton— hubiese visto con simpatía los sueños de una muchacha cuyas ideas acerca del matrimonio adquirían toda su fuerza de un extraordinario entusiasmo por los fines últimos de la existencia, entusiasmo alimentado sobre todo por su propio fuego y que no incluía ni los primores del *trousseau*, ni el diseño de la vajilla, ni las consideraciones que se tienen con una futura madre, ni tampoco sus tiernas alegrías.

A la señorita Brooke se le acababa de ocurrir la idea de que quizá el señor Casaubon quisiera hacerla su esposa y la posibilidad de que tal proyecto llegara a concretarse la llenaba de reverente gratitud. ¡Cuánta bondad la suya…! ¡Más aún, sería casi como si un alado mensajero se le hubiera aparecido de repente extendiendo la mano! Durante mucho tiempo la había angustiado la incertidumbre, que flotaba en su espíritu como una densa calina veraniega, sobre sus deseos de consagrarse a algo realmente eficaz. ¿Qué podía hacer, qué debía hacer ella, mujer apenas en agraz, pero dotada de una conciencia muy activa y de una gran curiosidad intelectual, que no había quedado satisfecha con una educación para jovencitas comparable a las cavilaciones y opiniones de un ratón pensante? Con cierta dosis de estupidez y de vanidad, Dorothea podría haber creído que una joven cristiana con fortuna hallaría su ideal de vida en las obras de caridad, en la ayuda a los clérigos más humildes, en la lectura constante de los *Personajes femeninos de las Escrituras*[12] para familiarizarse con las experiencias de Sara en el Antiguo Testamento y de Dorcas en el Nuevo, y en el cuidado de su alma mientras bordaba en su saloncito, con la perspectiva de llegar a casarse con un hombre que, si bien sería menos estricto que ella, dado que se vería mezclado en asuntos inexplicables desde un punto de vista religioso, estaría en condiciones de que se rezara por él y de que se le dirigieran las exhortaciones oportunas. La pobre Dorothea quedaba excluida de semejante tipo de consuelos. La intensidad de sus sentimientos religiosos, y las restricciones vitales que esos sentimientos le imponían, eran un aspecto más de un temperamento muy ardiente y de una personalidad inclinada a teorizar e intelectualmente consecuente; y con semejante personalidad, que se esforzaba por superar unas enseñanzas demasiado limitadas, encerrada en una vida social que no parecía más que un laberinto de insignificantes trayectorias, un recinto amurallado de callejuelas que no llevaban a ningún sitio, los resultados tenían sin duda que impresionar a otros como una mezcla de exageración y de incoherencia. Dorothea quería justificar lo que le parecía mejor con el conocimiento más completo posible, en lugar de vivir fingiendo aceptar unas reglas que nunca se aplicaban en la práctica. Hacia aquella hambre espiritual se había volcado todo su juvenil entusiasmo; le atraía una unión que sirviera para librarla de la sujeción femenina a su propia ignorancia y le diese la libertad de someterse voluntariamente a un guía que pudiera conducirla por la más noble de las sendas.

«Podré aprenderlo todo —se dijo, mientras avanzaba a buen paso por el camino de herradura que atravesaba el bosque—. Será deber mío estudiar para poder ayudarlo mejor en sus grandes obras. No habrá

nada trivial en nuestras vidas. Hasta las realidades más cotidianas se transformarán. Será como casarse con Pascal. Aprenderé a ver la verdad con la misma luz con que la han visto los grandes hombres. Y también sabré qué hacer cuando envejezca: veré cómo es posible llevar una vida ilustre aquí… ahora… en Inglaterra. No tengo seguridad sobre los modos de hacer el bien; es como ir de misión entre unas gentes cuya lengua desconozco; a no ser que se trate de construir casas mejores y más cómodas, sobre eso sí que ni puede haber dudas. ¡Ojalá consiga buenas casas para la gente de Lowick! Dibujaré muchos planos mientras disponga de tiempo».

Dorothea se detuvo de repente, reconviniéndose por el modo presuntuoso que tenía de hacer cálculos acerca de sucesos problemáticos, pero, gracias a la aparición de un jinete al galope en una de las revueltas del camino, no precisó de ningún esfuerzo interior para cambiar el rumbo de sus pensamientos. El caballo zaino muy bien cuidado y los dos hermosos setters despejaban cualquier duda sobre la identidad del jinete: se trataba de sir James Chettam, quien, al reconocer a Dorothea, se apeó inmediatamente del caballo y, después de entregárselo a su mozo, se acercó con algo blanco bajo el brazo, algo que provocaba ladridos de excitación a los dos setters.

—¡Qué agradable sorpresa encontrarla, señorita Brooke! —dijo sir James, quitándose el sombrero y dejando al descubierto sus cabellos rubios suavemente ondulados—. Ha adelantado usted un placer del que ya me disponía a disfrutar.

A la señorita Brooke le molestó aquella interrupción. El afable baronet, un marido perfectamente apropiado para Celia, exageraba la necesidad de mostrarse cordial con su hermana mayor. Incluso un futuro cuñado puede resultar molesto si da por sentada la existencia de un completo entendimiento e incluso cede siempre cuando se le contradice. La idea de que sir James estuviera cometiendo la equivocación de cortejarla no llegó a tomar forma: toda la actividad mental de Dorothea iba en otra dirección. Pero en aquel momento el baronet la estorbaba y sus manos de persona ociosa le resultaron muy desagradables. La contrariedad que sentía hizo que la tez de Dorothea se encendiera mientras respondía al saludo de sir James con cierta altivez.

El baronet interpretó aquel rubor como signo de aprobación y pensó que no la había visto nunca tan guapa.

—He traído conmigo a un pequeño solicitante —dijo— o, más bien, lo he traído para ver si se le aprueba antes de presentar su solicitud. —Sir James mostró el objeto blanco que llevaba bajo el brazo, un cachorrillo de maltés, uno de los más ingenuos juguetes de la naturaleza.

—Me resultan penosas estas criaturas que tienen como único destino ser animales falderos —dijo Dorothea, expresando una opinión que estaba formando en aquel mismo momento (como sucede muchas veces), al calor de la irritación.

—¿Sí? ¿Por qué? —dijo sir James mientras reanudaban la marcha.

—Creo que los mimos que reciben no los hacen felices. Están demasiado indefensos; sus vidas son demasiado frágiles. Una comadreja o un ratón que consiguen su propio sustento son más interesantes. Me gusta pensar que los animales que nos rodean tienen almas parecidas a las nuestras y que, o bien se dedican a sus ocupaciones, o son compañeros nuestros, como Monk, por ejemplo. Pero esas criaturas son parásitos.

—Me alegra mucho saber que no le gustan —dijo el bueno de sir James—. A mí nunca se me ocurriría tener uno, pero de ordinario a las damas les gustan los perros malteses. John, cójalo, haga el favor.

Se prescindió así del desagradable cachorro, de hocico y ojos negros y expresivos, puesto que, según la señorita Brooke, habría sido mejor que no hubiese nacido. Pero Dorothea sintió la necesidad de añadir algunas precisiones.

—No debe usted juzgar los sentimientos de Celia por los míos. Creo que a mi hermana le gustan estos perritos falderos. En cierta ocasión tuvo un terrier enano y lo quería mucho. Yo me angustiaba porque me daba miedo pisarlo. Soy bastante corta de vista.

—Usted tiene opiniones propias sobre todo, señorita Brooke, y siempre son muy acertadas.

¿Qué respuesta se podía dar a un cumplido tan estúpido?

—¿Sabe? Eso es una cosa que le envidio —dijo sir James, mientras continuaban andando al ritmo más bien rápido que marcaba Dorothea.

—No entiendo bien lo que quiere usted decir.

—Me refiero a su capacidad para formar opiniones. Yo tengo opinión sobre las personas. Sé qué gente me gusta. Pero en otros asuntos, ¿sabe?, con frecuencia me cuesta decidir. Se oyen cosas muy razonables en campos opuestos.

—O que parecen razonables. Quizá no siempre distinguimos entre razón y sinrazón.

Dorothea comprendió que se estaba mostrando bastante descortés.

—Muy cierto —dijo sir James—. Pero usted parece muy capaz de distinguir.

—Nada de eso. Muchas veces no sé qué decisión tomar. Pero se debe a la ignorancia. La conclusión acertada existe de todas formas, aunque sea incapaz de verla.

—Creo que hay personas que la ven con más facilidad, ¿sabe? Lovegood me decía ayer que tiene usted las mejores ideas del mundo para las casas de los colonos… realmente maravilloso para una joven, en su opinión. Dijo que tiene usted verdadero *genus*, para usar su misma expresión. Aseguró que quiere usted que el señor Brooke construya un nuevo grupo de viviendas, pero parecía pensar que es muy poco probable que su tío dé el consentimiento. Y, ¿sabe?, esa es una de las cosas que me gustaría hacer, quiero decir, en mis propias tierras. Me agradaría mucho realizar ese proyecto suyo si me permite verlo. Claro está que es una mala inversión: por eso la gente pone dificultades. Los arrendatarios nunca podrán pagar alquileres que amorticen el gasto. Pero, de todas formas, merece la pena.

—¡Claro que merece la pena! —dijo Dorothea con gran energía, olvidándose de sus anteriores motivos de mal humor—. Creo que estaría justificado sacarnos a latigazos de nuestras hermosas mansiones a todos los que permitimos que los arrendatarios vivan en esas pocilgas a las que llamamos casas. La existencia de los colonos podría ser más feliz que la nuestra si sus viviendas fuesen verdaderas casas, dignas de seres humanos a los que exigimos que cumplan con sus deberes y de los que esperamos afecto.

—¿Me enseñará usted su proyecto?

—Claro que sí, por supuesto. Me atrevo a decir que tiene muchos defectos, pero he examinado todos los planos para viviendas rurales del libro de Loudon[13] y he elegido las cosas que me han parecido mejores. ¡Qué maravilloso sería dar ejemplo en esta zona! Creo que en lugar de tener a Lázaro a la puerta, deberíamos eliminar de nuestras propiedades esas casas que son como zahúrdas.

Dorothea estaba ya de muy buen humor. ¡Sir James, como cuñado, construyendo viviendas modelo en sus propiedades, y quizá otras que se edificarían en Lowick, y muchas más en otros sitios a imitación suya…! ¡Sería como si el espíritu de Oberlin[14] hubiese pasado por las parroquias para hacer hermosa la vida de los pobres!

Sir James vio todos los planos y se llevó uno consigo para consultar con Lovegood. Y tuvo además la agradable impresión de que la señorita Brooke lo miraba con mayor afecto. A Celia no se le ofreció el cachorro maltés, omisión que Dorothea advirtió después con sorpresa, pero de la que se creyó culpable por haber monopolizado a sir James. Aunque, en realidad, era un alivio no tener en casa un perrillo al que se corría el riesgo de pisar.

Celia estuvo presente mientras se examinaban los planos y advirtió las esperanzas de sir James. «Piensa que Dodo se interesa por él, pero a ella solo le preocupan esos proyectos. Aunque no estoy segura de que lo rechazase si creyera que sir James le dejaría manejarlo todo y llevar a la práctica sus ideas. Y ¡qué mal lo iba a pasar él! Las mujeres no tienen por qué tener ideas».

Un lujo peculiar de Celia era permitirse aquella animadversión a las ideas. No se atrevía a confesárselo a su hermana de manera directa, porque eso supondría exponerse a que se dijera de ella que, de un modo u otro, estaba en guerra con todas las manifestaciones de la bondad. Pero cuando no existía ese peligro, Celia lograba de forma indirecta que su sagacidad mundana afectara a Dorothea y le hiciera abandonar sus exaltaciones anímicas, recordándole que la gente veía pero no oía. Celia no era impulsiva: lo que tenía que decir podía esperar y las palabras siempre salían de su boca con la misma ecuanimidad pausada y tranquila. Cuando la gente hablaba con mucha energía y haciendo mucho hincapié, ella se limitaba a contemplar su rostro y cada uno de sus rasgos. Nunca lograría entender cómo era posible que personas bien educadas se prestaran a cantar y a abrir la boca de la ridícula manera requerida por aquel ejercicio vocal.

Pocos días después el señor Casaubon les hizo otra visita matutina, durante la cual se le invitó de nuevo a que cenara con ellos un día de la semana siguiente y se quedara a pasar la noche. Dorothea tuvo así tres nuevas ocasiones de charlar con él y se convenció de que sus primeras impresiones habían sido certeras. El señor Casaubon era como ella había imaginado desde el primer momento: casi todo lo que le decía se asemejaba a una muestra sacada de una mina o a la inscripción en la puerta de un museo que encerrase grandes tesoros de edades pretéritas; y el convencimiento de su riqueza mental se hizo más profundo y más firme con la seguridad de que era ella la razón de sus visitas. Aquel hombre con tantos merecimientos se dignaba pensar en una muchacha y se tomaba la molestia de hablar con ella, no para dirigirle absurdos cumplidos, sino para hacer un llamamiento a su inteligencia y en ocasiones para corregir instruyendo. ¡Qué deliciosa camaradería! El señor Casaubon parecía incluso no darse cuenta de la existencia de trivialidades, y nunca recurría a esos típicos comentarios intrascendentes, tan insulsos como una rancia porción de tarta nupcial con olor a despensa. Hablaba de las cosas que le interesaban o, de lo contrario, permanecía silencioso e inclinaba la cabeza con melancólica cortesía. Para Dorothea eso era prueba de una maravillosa

autenticidad y de una actitud ascética contraria a la artificiosidad que desgasta el alma en inútiles esfuerzos de fingimiento. Porque la reverencia de la señorita Brooke por la superioridad religiosa del señor Casaubon era comparable con la que le inspiraban su inteligencia y sus conocimientos. Él, por su parte, se mostraba de acuerdo con los devotos sentimientos de Dorothea y añadía, de ordinario, alguna cita adecuada; incluso explicaba a veces que, en su juventud, también él había sufrido algunos conflictos espirituales; Dorotea vio, en resumen, que podía contar con su interés, su comprensión y su asesoramiento. Quedó, sin embargo, desilusionada en cuanto a una de sus preocupaciones favoritas (pero solo una). El señor Casaubon, al parecer, no se interesaba por la construcción de viviendas, y desviaba la conversación hacia los habitáculos extraordinariamente reducidos de los antiguos egipcios, como para contrarrestar unas aspiraciones demasiado elevadas. Después de su marcha, Dorothea meditó con cierta inquietud sobre aquella indiferencia del señor Casaubon, razonando sobre cómo las diferentes condiciones climatológicas modifican las necesidades humanas y también sobre la reconocida maldad de los déspotas paganos. ¿No debería exhortar al señor Casaubon con aquellos razonamientos cuando volviera a verlo? Pero posteriores reflexiones le hicieron ver que sería un atrevimiento excesivo llamar su atención sobre aquel tema; a él no le parecería mal que Dorothea se ocupara de ello en sus momentos de ocio, como se esperaba que otras mujeres se dedicasen a sus vestidos y a sus bordados; sin duda no se lo prohibiría cuando… Dorothea se avergonzó al descubrirse haciendo aquellas previsiones. Pero su tío había recibido una invitación para pasar dos días en Lowick; ¿era razonable suponer que el señor Casaubon deseaba exclusivamente la compañía del señor Brooke, con documentos o sin ellos?

Entretanto aquella pequeña desilusión sirvió para que Dorothea agradeciera aún más la buena disposición de sir James Chettam para llevar a cabo las reformas deseadas. El baronet aparecía por Tipton Grange con mucha más frecuencia que el señor Casaubon, y la señorita Brooke dejó de encontrarlo desagradable desde que demostró su absoluta buena disposición, porque ya había empezado a estudiar, con gran sentido práctico, los presupuestos de Lovegood, y daba muestras de una conmovedora docilidad. Dorothea propuso construir un par de casas y trasladar allí a dos familias, con lo que se podrían tirar sus antiguas cabañas y construir en el sitio libre nuevas casas. Sir James dijo: «Muy cierto», y la señorita Brooke soportó aquellas dos palabras con notable ecuanimidad.

Sin duda alguna los hombres con tan pocas ideas autónomas podían ser miembros muy útiles de la sociedad bajo una buena dirección femenina, ¡si tenían suerte al elegir cuñadas! Es difícil decir hasta qué punto había algo de voluntaria ofuscación en la prolongada ceguera de Dorothea ante la posibilidad de que se le planteara otro tipo de elección. Pero en aquel momento su vida estaba llena de esperanzas y de actividad; no solo se ocupaba de sus planos, sino que conseguía libros muy doctos de la biblioteca y leía apresuradamente muchas cosas (para mostrarse un poco menos ignorante al hablar con el señor Casaubon), sin dejar por ello de tener dudas de conciencia sobre si no estaría engrandeciendo sus pobres acciones más de lo debido y contemplándolas con una vanidosa satisfacción que era prueba definitiva de ignorancia e insensatez.

Capítulo IV

PRIMER CABALLERO: Nuestras acciones son cadenas que forjamos nosotros mismos.
SEGUNDO CABALLERO: Así es, pero creo que es el mundo quien proporciona el hierro.[15]

—Sir James parece decidido a realizar todos tus deseos —dijo Celia mientras volvían a casa en coche después de inspeccionar el emplazamiento de las nuevas construcciones.

—Es muy buena persona y más sensato de lo que cabría imaginar —dijo Dorothea con muy poca consideración.

—Quieres decir que parece tonto.

—No, no —exclamó Dorothea, procurando esconder su turbación y poniendo la mano sobre la de su hermana durante unos instantes—, pero no habla con la misma soltura sobre todos los temas.

—En mi opinión eso solo lo hacen las personas desagradables —dijo Celia con su habitual tono de gatita satisfecha—. Debe de ser terrible vivir con gente así. ¡Imagínate! Ya en el desayuno y después durante todo el día.

Dorothea se echó a reír.

—¡Ah, Kitty, eres una criatura maravillosa! —Pellizcó la barbilla de Celia, ya que su buen humor hacía que la considerara en aquel momento llena de simpatía y de atractivo… poseedora de todas las cualidades para ser, de allí en adelante, un querubín y, si no fuera doctrinalmente heterodoxo decirlo, apenas más necesitada de salvación que una ardilla—. Por supuesto no hace falta que la gente hable siempre bien. Pero nos damos cuenta de su capacidad mental cuando lo intentan.

—Quieres decir que sir James lo intenta y no lo consigue.

—Hablaba en general. ¿Por qué me interrogas acerca de sir James? No soy yo su principal interés.

—Pero, Dodo, ¿cómo es posible que creas una cosa así?

—Por supuesto. Me ve como su futura hermana, eso es todo. —Dorothea no había aludido nunca a aquel tema, esperando, debido a cierta timidez sobre tales asuntos, compartida por las dos hermanas, a que algún suceso importante lo sacara a relucir.

Celia se ruborizó, pero dijo en seguida:

—Haz el favor de no seguir ni un momento más confundida en este asunto, Dodo. Cuando Tantripp me cepillaba el pelo el otro día, dijo que el criado de sir James sabía por la doncella de la señora Cadwallader que su señor iba a casarse con la señorita Brooke, la mayor.

—¿Cómo permites que Tantripp te cuente esas habladurías, Celia? —dijo Dorothea llena de indignación, sobre todo al advertir cómo despertaban ahora en su memoria detalles dormidos que confirmaban tan desagradable descubrimiento—. Seguro que se lo preguntaste tú. Es una vergüenza.

—No veo que haya nada malo en hablar con Tantripp. Es mejor oír lo que dice la gente. Ya ves las equivocaciones que cometes con esas ideas tuyas. Estoy segura de que sir James tiene intención de pedirte en matrimonio; y cree que le vas a decir que sí, sobre todo desde que estás tan satisfecha de él a causa de tus proyectos. Y el tío también… Sé que lo espera. Todo el mundo nota que sir James está enamorado de ti.

La repugnancia que sintió Dorothea fue tan intensa y tan dolorosa que las lágrimas acudieron a sus ojos y fluyeron en abundancia. Todos sus queridos proyectos perdieron su encanto y pensó con desagrado en sir James imaginándose que ella lo aceptaba como pretendiente. Y también le humillaba pensar en Celia.

—¿Cómo es posible que tenga esperanzas? —estalló con todo el ímpetu de que era capaz—. Nunca me he mostrado de acuerdo con él en nada, solo en lo de las viviendas; antes apenas puede decirse que fuera

cortés con él.

—Pero estás muy satisfecha con él desde entonces; y empieza a estar convencido de que te gusta.

—¡Gustarme, Celia! ¿Por qué eliges esas expresiones tan odiosas? —dijo Dorothea llena de apasionamiento.

—No entiendo por qué te pones así. No creo que haya nada de malo en que te guste un hombre al que has aceptado por marido.

—Me resulta ofensivo que sir James pueda pensar que me gusta. Además, no es esa la mejor manera de expresar el sentimiento que debe inspirarme el hombre que acepte por marido.

—Bueno; lo siento por sir James. He creído conveniente decírtelo porque sigues adelante, como lo haces siempre, sin darte cuenta de dónde estás y pisando donde no debes. Tú siempre ves lo que nadie ve; es imposible contentarte; pero no ves nunca lo que está bien claro. Esa es tu manera de ser, Dodo. —Algo, sin duda, dio a Celia un valor fuera de lo ordinario, y no hizo el menor esfuerzo por dorar la píldora a la hermana que en ocasiones le inspiraba un temor reverente. ¿Quién podría decirnos qué justas críticas no hace sobre nosotros, seres de más amplia capacidad mental, el gato Murr[16]?

—Es muy doloroso —dijo Dorothea, sintiéndose hostigada—. Tendré que renunciar a las viviendas para los colonos. Debo mostrarme descortés con él. Decirle que no quiero saber nada más de los proyectos. Es muy doloroso. —Los ojos se le volvieron a llenar de lágrimas.

—Espera un poco. Piénsalo con calma. Ya sabes que estará fuera un día o dos, visitando a su hermana. Aquí solo quedará Lovegood. —Celia no pudo por menos de ablandarse—. Pobre Dodo —continuó, con pausada afabilidad—. Es muy duro; tu *diversión* favorita es hacer planos.

—¡*Diversión* mía hacer planos! ¿Crees que solo me intereso por las casas de mis prójimos de esa manera tan infantil? No me extraña que cometa equivocaciones. ¿Cómo se puede hacer nada noblemente cristiano, viviendo entre personas de ideas tan mezquinas?

Nada más se dijo: Dorothea estaba demasiado disgustada para recobrar la calma y demostrar con su comportamiento que admitía haberse equivocado. Se hallaba dispuesta, más bien, a culpar de lo sucedido a la intolerable ruindad y a la conciencia miope de la sociedad que la rodeaba; y Celia no era ya un querubín, sino una espina clavada en el alma, una descreída falsamente inocente, peor que cualquier presencia descorazonadora en *El viaje del peregrino*. ¡La *diversión* de hacer planos! ¿Qué valor tenía la vida…? ¿Cómo era posible una gran fe cuando las propias acciones podían marchitarse y quedar reducidas a un reseco desperdicio como aquel? Cuando se apeó del vehículo tenía las mejillas pálidas y los párpados enrojecidos. Era una imagen del dolor, y su tío, al encontrarse con Dorothea en el vestíbulo, se hubiese alarmado de no haber visto a su lado a Celia tan bonita y con un aire tan sereno que el señor Brooke llegó inmediatamente a la conclusión de que las lágrimas de Dorothea obedecían a su excesiva religiosidad. El señor Brooke acababa de regresar de un viaje a la capital del condado para solicitar que se perdonara a un delincuente.

—Bien, hijas mías —dijo, amablemente, mientras sus sobrinas se acercaban a besarlo—. Confío en que no haya sucedido nada desagradable durante mi ausencia.

—No, tío —dijo Celia—, hemos ido a Freshitt a ver las viviendas. Pensábamos que estarías en casa a la hora del almuerzo.

—Me detuve en Lowick para almorzar… ¿No sabíais que iba a quedarme allí? Y te he traído un par de folletos, Dorothea… En la biblioteca, ya sabes; sobre la mesa.

Pareció como si una corriente eléctrica atravesara a su sobrina, transformando su desaliento en esperanza. Eran folletos sobre la Iglesia primitiva. La angustia causada por Celia, Tantripp y sir James desapareció y Dorothea fue directamente a la biblioteca. Celia subió al piso alto. Al señor Brooke lo detuvieron para darle un recado, y cuando volvió a entrar en la biblioteca encontró a Dorothea sentada y sumergida ya en uno de los textos, enriquecido con algunas notas a mano del señor Casaubon, leyéndolo con el mismo anhelo con que podría haber olido un ramillete de flores recién cortadas después de un largo, aburrido y caluroso paseo.

Estaba alejándose de Tipton y de Freshitt y también de su triste equivocación al haber pisado donde no debía en su caminar hacia la Nueva Jerusalén.

El señor Brooke se sentó en su sillón, estiró las piernas hacia el fuego de leña, que se había transformado en una prodigiosa masa de cubos resplandecientes entre los morillos, y se frotó despacio las manos, mirando con dulzura a Dorothea, pero con un aire neutral, sosegado, como si no tuviera nada especial que decir. Dorothea cerró el folleto cuando advirtió la presencia de su tío, y se levantó para marcharse. De ordinario habría manifestado interés por su expedición en favor del delincuente, pero su reciente turbación la había distraído.

—He vuelto pasando por Lowick, ya sabes —dijo el señor Brooke, como sin intención de detener su

marcha y movido tan solo, a primera vista, por su habitual tendencia a repetir lo que ya había dicho anteriormente, principio fundamental del habla humana que se manifestaba de manera muy notable en el caso del señor Brooke—. Almorcé allí, vi la biblioteca de Casaubon y algunas cosas más. Sopla un aire muy cortante, viniendo en coche. ¿Por qué no te sientas, querida? Pareces tener frío.

Dorothea aceptó de buen grado la invitación. A veces, cuando la despreocupación con que su tío se enfrentaba a la vida no resultaba exasperante, podía tener un efecto bastante tranquilizador. Dorothea se quitó la capa y el sombrero y se sentó frente a él, disfrutando con el calor del fuego, pero alzando, a modo de pantalla, sus hermosas manos, que no eran ni delgadas ni pequeñas, sino llenas de fuerza, femeninas, maternales. Parecía elevarlas en gesto propiciatorio por aquel apasionado deseo suyo de conocer y de pensar que, en el medio hostil de Tipton y de Freshitt, solo había producido lágrimas y párpados enrojecidos.

Ahora sí se acordó del delincuente sentenciado.

—¿Qué noticias has traído sobre el ladrón de ovejas, tío?

—¿Te refieres al pobre Bunch? Bueno, parece que no se puede hacer nada; van a ahorcarlo.

El rostro de Dorothea adquirió una expresión de censura y de compasión al mismo tiempo.

—Van a ahorcarlo, ¿comprendes? —dijo el señor Brooke, con una pausada inclinación de cabeza—. ¡Pobre Romilly![17], él nos hubiese ayudado. Yo conocí a Romilly. Casaubon no. Se entierra demasiado en sus libros, ¿sabes? Es eso lo que le pasa.

—Cuando un hombre se consagra a estudios importantes y escribe una gran obra, ha de renunciar, por supuesto, a muchas cosas del mundo. ¿Cómo podría dedicarse a conocer gente?

—Eso es cierto. Pero un hombre se deprime, ¿sabes? Yo tampoco me he casado, pero por mi manera de ser nunca me dio por deprimirme; siempre iba a todas partes y me enteraba de todo. Nunca me he sentido solo, pero veo que a Casaubon sí le pasa, ¿sabes? Quiere alguien que le haga compañía… necesita compañía, ya sabes.

—Sería un gran honor para cualquiera hacerle compañía —respondió Dorothea con gran decisión.

—Te resulta simpático, ¿eh? —dijo el señor Brooke sin manifestar la menor sorpresa ni ninguna otra emoción—. Hace diez años que conozco a Casaubon, desde que se instaló en Lowick, y nunca he sacado nada de él… ninguna idea, quiero decir. Pero es un hombre con prestigio y puede llegar a obispo… ese tipo de cosas, ya sabes, si Peel sigue en el gobierno[18]. Y tiene muy buena opinión de ti, querida.

Dorothea no supo qué contestar.

—Lo cierto es que te tiene en gran estima. Y habla extraordinariamente bien, no cabe la menor duda. Ha delegado en mí, dado que tú no eres aún mayor de edad. En resumen, he prometido hablarte, aunque advirtiéndole que, en mi opinión, no tiene muchas probabilidades. Era lógico decirle eso. «Mi sobrina es muy joven», le he explicado, y otras cosas por el estilo. Aunque no me ha parecido necesario contárselo todo. En cualquier caso, el meollo del asunto es que me ha pedido permiso para hacerte una proposición matrimonial… para pedirte que te cases con él, ya sabes —concluyó el señor Brooke, haciendo una de sus inclinaciones de cabeza de carácter explicativo—. Me ha parecido mejor decírtelo, querida.

Nadie hubiese podido advertir la menor preocupación en su actitud, aunque estaba deseoso de saber cómo pensaba su sobrina, para poder aconsejarla en caso necesario. Los sentimientos que él, como magistrado que se había apropiado de tantas ideas, aún encontraba sitio para albergar, eran de absoluta benevolencia. Como Dorothea no habló inmediatamente, el señor Brooke repitió:

—Me ha parecido mejor decírtelo, querida.

—Gracias, tío —respondió la señorita Brooke con voz clara y firme—. Estoy muy agradecida al señor Casaubon. Si pide mi mano, aceptaré. Lo admiro y lo respeto más que a ninguno de los hombres que he conocido.

El señor Brooke hizo una breve pausa y luego dijo con voz baja y vacilante:

—¿Sí? ¡Vaya! Es un buen partido en algunos aspectos. Pero hay que decir que también Chettam es un excelente partido. Y nuestras tierras lindan con las suyas. Nunca me opondré a tus deseos, querida. Las personas deben casarse de acuerdo con sus preferencias, ya se sabe… hasta cierto punto, claro está. Eso es lo que siempre he dicho, hasta cierto punto. Quiero que te cases bien y tengo buenas razones para creer que Chettam desea casarse contigo. No hago más que decírtelo, compréndelo.

—Es de todo punto imposible que yo me case con sir James Chettam —dijo Dorothea—. Si piensa que estoy dispuesta a casarme con él ha cometido una gran equivocación.

—Eso es lo que pasa, ¿comprendes? Uno nunca sabe. Yo hubiera pensado que Chettam es el tipo de hombre que gusta a las mujeres, si he de ser sincero.

—Por favor, tío, no vuelvas a hablar de él así —dijo Dorothea, reviviendo en parte su anterior

indignación.

El señor Brooke quedó muy sorprendido, y pensó que las mujeres eran un tema de estudio inagotable, ya que incluso él, a su edad, no estaba en condiciones de hacer una adecuada predicción científica sobre su comportamiento. Nada menos que un tipo como Chettam sin esperanzas de ninguna clase.

—Bien, en cuanto a Casaubon… vamos a ver. No hay ninguna prisa… por tu parte, digo. Es cierto que cada año que pase le dejará su huella. Ya tiene más de cuarenta y cinco, ¿sabes? Yo diría que es por lo menos veintisiete años mayor que tú. Claro que si te gusta la erudición y el prestigio intelectual y otras cosas por el estilo… No podemos tenerlo todo. Sus rentas son buenas: cuenta con una excelente propiedad, independiente de la Iglesia… buenas rentas. Pero no es joven y no debo ocultarte, querida, que en mi opinión está delicado de salud. No sé de ninguna otra objeción que se le pueda poner.

—No me agradaría un marido de edad muy semejante a la mía —dijo Dorothea con gran firmeza—. Me gustaría que estuviera por encima de mí en discernimiento y en todas las ramas del saber.

El señor Brooke repitió su débil «¿Sí?», y añadió:

—Yo pensaba que tenías más opiniones personales que la mayoría de las jóvenes. Creía que te gustaban tus propias ideas… ya sabes.

—No sabría vivir sin opiniones propias, pero me gustaría tener buenas razones para mantenerlas y un hombre sabio me ayudaría a descubrir las que están mejor fundamentadas y a vivir de acuerdo con ellas.

—Muy cierto. No podrías haberlo expresado mejor… no podrías haberlo dicho mejor… y como teoría, ya sabes. Pero la vida es muy extraña —continuó el señor Brooke, que en aquel trance estaba verdaderamente decidido a hacer por su sobrina todo lo que estuviera en sus manos—. La vida no está hecha con molde, ni cortada con precisión, ni nada por el estilo. Yo no me he casado y en eso saldréis ganando tú y los tuyos. La verdad es que nunca quise a nadie lo suficiente para dejarme coger con lazo por causa suya. Porque es un lazo, ¿sabes? El mal genio, por ejemplo. Está el mal genio. Y a un marido le gusta mandar.

—Sé que debo esperar tribulaciones, tío. El matrimonio es un estado con exigencias más altas. Nunca he pensado que se trate de simple comodidad personal —dijo la pobre Dorothea.

—Es cierto que no te gusta aparentar, ni una gran casa, ni bailes, ni cenas, ni otras cosas así. Comprendo que la manera de vivir de Casaubon pueda convenirte más que la de Chettam. Y desde luego tienes libertad para hacer lo que desees, hija mía. No pondré obstáculos a Casaubon; se lo dije inmediatamente; porque no hay manera de saber cómo resultará nada. Tú no tienes los mismos gustos que todas las muchachas y un clérigo y erudito… que puede llegar a obispo… todas esas cosas… Quizá te convenga más que Chettam. Chettam es una persona estupenda, con un gran corazón, ya sabes; pero no le tiran mucho las ideas. A mí sí me interesaban cuando tenía sus años. Pero están los ojos de Casaubon. Creo que se los ha estropeado un poco leyendo en exceso.

—Seré tanto más feliz, tío, cuantas más posibilidades tenga de ayudarlo —dijo Dorothea con gran ardor.

—Ya veo que estás decidida. Bueno, querida, lo cierto es que traigo una carta para ti en el bolsillo. —El señor Brooke le dio la misiva, pero mientras Dorothea se levantaba para marcharse, añadió—: No tengas demasiada prisa, querida. Piénsalo bien, ya sabes.

Cuando Dorothea le hubo dejado, el señor Brooke llegó a la conclusión de que había hablado con energía, sin duda alguna; le había expuesto a su sobrina los riesgos del matrimonio de forma extraordinariamente clara. Era su deber hacerlo. Pero en cuanto a reivindicar un mayor conocimiento sobre la gente joven, ningún tío, por mucho que hubiese viajado en su juventud, por mucho que hubiese asimilado las ideas nuevas y hubiese cenado con celebridades ya difuntas, estaba en condiciones de dictaminar qué clase de matrimonio daría buenos resultados para una muchacha que prefería Casaubon a Chettam. En resumen, el problema de la mujer, ante el que el señor Brooke se sentía completamente desconcertado, apenas podía ser menos complicado que el de la rotación de un sólido irregular.

Capítulo V

> Los que estudian mucho se ven comúnmente atacados de gota, catarros, bradipepsia, vista cansada, cálculos, cólicos, malas digestiones, oclusiones, vértigo, flato, tisis y todas las enfermedades que vienen de pasar demasiado tiempo sentados: en su mayor parte están delgados, resecos, con mal color… y todo ello debido a esfuerzos inmoderados y a estudios fuera de lo común. Si no se quiere creer la verdad de todo esto, examínense las obras del gran Tostado y de Tomás de Aquino; y dígase si esos hombres no se esforzaron en gran manera.
>
> R. BURTON, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, P. 1, s. 2

Esta era la carta del señor Casaubon.

Mi querida señorita Brooke:

Cuento con el permiso de su tutor para dirigirme a usted acerca de un asunto del máximo interés para mí. Confío en no equivocarme al advertir una correspondencia más profunda que la simple coincidencia de fechas entre el descubrimiento de que existe un vacío en mi vida y el hecho de haberla conocido a usted. Porque durante la primera hora que pasamos juntos tuve ya el convencimiento de su eminente y quizá exclusiva idoneidad para llenar ese vacío (convencimiento conectado, es lícito decirlo, con esa actividad de los afectos que ni siquiera las preocupaciones de un trabajo demasiado singular para que uno lo abandone podrían ocultar ininterrumpidamente); y cada sucesiva oportunidad para la observación ha afianzado ese convencimiento, confirmando sin lugar a dudas la existencia de esa idoneidad que yo había imaginado, lo que ha despertado, en consecuencia, de manera más decidida, esos afectos a los que acabo de referirme. Creo que nuestras conversaciones han aclarado suficientemente para usted el tenor de mi vida y de mis propósitos: una orientación poco apropiada, me doy cuenta, para el nivel más común de los entendimientos. Pero he advertido en usted una elevación de pensamiento y una capacidad de abnegación que hasta ahora no había creído compatible ni con la lozanía de la juventud ni con esos encantos femeninos de los que puede decirse sin temor a errar que conquistan y otorgan distinción cuando, como sucede de manera muy notable en su caso, se hallan combinados con las cualidades mentales anteriormente mencionadas. Confieso que me parecía imposible llegar a encontrar esa singular combinación de seriedad y atractivo, capaz de proporcionar ayuda en tareas de gran importancia y de deleitar durante las horas de ocio; y de no ser por la fortuna de haber llegado a conocerla (lo que, permítame decírselo de nuevo, no considero simple coincidencia con necesidades presagiadas, sino resultado de una providencial relación con ellas, pues se trata de sucesivas etapas hacia la realización de un proyecto vital), cabe presumir que hubiese continuado hasta el fin de mis días sin hacer el menor intento de aliviar mi soledad mediante un enlace matrimonial.

Tal es, mi querida señorita Brooke, la fiel descripción de mis sentimientos y fío en su clemencia para atreverme a preguntarle hasta qué punto la naturaleza de los suyos permitirá confirmar mis felices presentimientos. Ser aceptado por usted como marido y como custodio terrenal de su bienestar constituirá para mí el más elevado y providencial de los dones. A cambio puedo ofrecerle al menos un afecto todavía incólume y la constante dedicación de una vida que, por breve que sea su futuro, carece de páginas anteriores donde, si decidiera usted hojearlas, pudiese encontrar anotaciones que le causaran justificada amargura o vergüenza. Aguardo la expresión de sus sentimientos con una ansiedad que (si fuera posible) la prudencia debería distraer mediante un

trabajo más arduo de lo habitual. Pero en este orden de experiencias soy todavía joven y, al imaginar una respuesta desfavorable, no puedo por menos de creer que resignarme a la soledad será más difícil después de la momentánea luz de la esperanza. En cualquier caso sepa que tendrá siempre en mí a su sincero y devoto servidor,

EDWARD CASAUBON

Dorothea no dejó de temblar mientras leía la carta; luego cayó de rodillas, ocultó el rostro entre las manos y sollozó. No podía rezar; bajo el embate de aquella tremenda emoción que volvía imprecisos los pensamientos y hacía que las imágenes flotaran de forma indefinida, solo fue capaz de arrojarse, con un infantil sentimiento de abandono, en el regazo de la conciencia divina que sustentaba la suya. Dorothea siguió en aquella actitud hasta el momento de ir a vestirse para la cena.

¿Cómo podría habérsele ocurrido examinar la carta, mirar con ojos críticos aquella declaración de amor? En su alma no cabía otra idea que la perspectiva inmediata de una vida más plena: era una neófita a punto de ascender a un nivel más elevado. Encontraría campo para utilizar las energías que se agitaban inquietas bajo la torpeza y las presiones de su propia ignorancia y el mezquino dogmatismo de las costumbres provincianas.

Ahora estaría en condiciones de dedicarse a deberes más grandes y, sin embargo, mejor definidos; ahora se le permitiría vivir continuamente bajo la luz de un espíritu reverenciado. Esta esperanza no dejaba de mezclarse con el calor de una orgullosa complacencia: la gozosa sorpresa virginal de verse elegida por el hombre que su admiración había escogido. Todo el apasionamiento de Dorothea se comunicó a su inteligencia, que se debatía en busca de una vida ideal; el resplandor de su adolescencia transfigurada iluminó el primer objeto que se puso a su altura. Al ímpetu con que la inclinación se transformó en voluntad decidida contribuyeron los pequeños sucesos del día que habían hecho patente su insatisfacción vital.

Después de cenar, mientras Celia tocaba un «aire, con variaciones», insignificante tintineo que simbolizaba la parte estética de la educación de las dos hermanas, Dorothea subió a su cuarto para dar respuesta a la carta del señor Casaubon. ¿Qué razón podía tener para retrasarla? La repitió tres veces, no porque quisiera cambiar las palabras, sino porque su mano se mostraba más insegura que de costumbre y no soportaba la idea de que al señor Casaubon su letra le pareciera mala e ilegible. Dorothea se enorgullecía de poseer una caligrafía en la que cada rasgo se distinguía sin necesidad de hacer muchas conjeturas, y deseaba hacer uso de aquel talento en beneficio de la vista del señor Casaubon. Tres veces escribió lo siguiente:

Mi querido señor Casaubon:

Le estoy muy agradecida por su afecto y por considerarme digna de ser su esposa. Nada me proporcionaría mayor felicidad en el futuro que la plena identificación con la suya. Si dijera algo más sería tan solo para repetir lo mismo de manera más extensa, porque en este momento solo puedo concentrarme en la idea de ser, durante el resto de mi vida, devotamente suya,

DOROTHEA BROOKE

Más tarde, aquella misma noche, la señorita Brooke buscó a su tío en la biblioteca: quería entregarle la carta para que pudiera enviarla a la mañana siguiente. El señor Brooke se sorprendió, pero su sorpresa solo se tradujo en unos momentos de silencio, durante los cuales empujó de un lado para otro diferentes objetos que tenía sobre el escritorio; finalmente se inmovilizó de espaldas al fuego de la chimenea, con las gafas de leer sobre la nariz, mirando la carta de su sobrina.

—¿Lo has pensado bien, hija mía? —dijo por fin.

—No era necesario pensarlo mucho, tío. No hay nada que me haga dudar. Si cambiase de idea sería por algo importante y totalmente nuevo para mí.

—¡Ah! ¿Le has dicho que sí? Entonces, ¿Chettam no tiene la menor posibilidad? ¿Es que te ha ofendido?… ofendido, ya sabes. ¿Qué es lo que no te gusta de Chettam?

—No hay nada en él que me guste —dijo Dorothea con bastante ímpetu.

El señor Brooke echó hacia atrás la cabeza y los hombros como si alguien le hubiese arrojado un proyectil de poco peso. Dorothea se sintió inmediatamente un poco culpable y dijo:

—No me gusta como marido. Es muy amable, creo… Se ha portado realmente bien con las viviendas

para los arrendatarios. Es un hombre muy bien intencionado.

—Pero tú necesitas un erudito, ¿no es eso? Bueno, pasa un poco en nuestra familia. Yo también padecí… esas ansias de conocimiento, de interesarme por todo… un poco en exceso…; y me llevó demasiado lejos; aunque eso no suele darse en las mujeres; o corre bajo tierra como los ríos de Grecia, ya sabes… reaparece en los hijos. Hijos inteligentes, madres inteligentes. Yo me interesé mucho por esas cosas en cierto momento. Sin embargo, siempre he dicho que las personas deben hacer lo que quieran, hasta cierto punto. Como tutor tuyo no podría dar mi consentimiento a una boda poco conveniente. Pero Casaubon está bien considerado; su posición es excelente. Aunque mucho me temo que Chettam se sentirá herido y la señora Cadwallader me echará a mí la culpa.

Aquella noche, por supuesto, Celia no sabía aún nada de lo sucedido. Atribuía el aire abstraído de Dorothea, y el hecho de que hubiese seguido llorando después de llegar a casa, a su enfado a raíz de su conversación sobre sir James Chettam y las viviendas, y tuvo buen cuidado de no echar más leña al fuego; una vez dicho lo que quería decir, Celia no se sentía inclinada a insistir en temas desagradables. Ya de niña su forma de ser la llevaba a no pelearse con nadie: tan solo a observar con asombro cómo los demás se enfadaban y se hinchaban como pavos; después de lo cual estaba lista para jugar con ellos a hacer cunitas en cuanto se les pasaba el mal humor. Y en cuanto a Dorothea, siempre conseguía encontrar en las palabras de Celia algo que le parecía mal, aunque su hermana se quejaba para sus adentros de que ella se limitaba a decir las cosas tal como eran y nada más: nunca inventaba nada y además no era capaz de hacerlo. Pero lo mejor de Dodo era que los enfados no le duraban mucho. Ahora, aunque las dos hermanas apenas se habían hablado durante la velada, cuando Celia recogió sus labores con intención de irse a la cama, operación en la que siempre era la primera, Dorothea, que estaba sentada en un taburete bajo, incapaz de ocuparse en otra cosa que no fuese meditar, dijo con la entonación musical que convertía sus palabras en un delicado fragmento de recitativo cuando la embargaban sentimientos hondos y sosegados:

—Celia, cariño, ven y dame un beso —abriendo los brazos mientras hablaba.

Celia se arrodilló para ponerse a la altura adecuada y le rozó apenas el rostro con los labios, mientras Dorothea la rodeaba con brazos amorosos y le daba un solemne beso en la mejilla.

—No te quedes mucho tiempo levantada, Dodo; estás muy pálida. Vete pronto a la cama —dijo Celia con voz perfectamente natural, sin el menor toque de patetismo.

—No, querida, soy feliz, muy feliz —dijo Dorothea con gran vehemencia.

«Tanto mejor —pensó Celia—. Pero de qué manera tan extraña pasa Dodo de un extremo a otro».

Al día siguiente, a la hora del almuerzo, el mayordomo, mientras entregaba algo al señor Brooke, dijo:

—Jonas ha vuelto, señor, y ha traído esta carta.

El señor Brooke leyó la misiva y luego, inclinando la cabeza en dirección a Dorothea, dijo:

—Casaubon, querida, vendrá a cenar; no ha esperado a escribir más… No ha esperado, ya me entiendes.

A Celia no podía parecerle anormal que se anunciara a su hermana la presencia de un invitado para la cena, pero al seguir con los ojos la mirada de su tío, le sorprendió el peculiar efecto de aquel aviso sobre Dorothea. Fue como si algo parecido al reflejo de un ala blanca iluminada por el sol hubiese cruzado sus facciones, dando como resultado uno de sus infrecuentes sonrojos. Por primera vez se le ocurrió que entre el señor Casaubon y su hermana pudiese haber algo más que el placer que sentía él al hablar de libros y la satisfacción de Dorothea al escucharlo. Hasta entonces había colocado la admiración por aquel «feo» y sabio visitante al mismo nivel de la que su hermana sintió en Lausana por *monsieur* Liret, también feo y sabio. Dorothea seguía escuchando sin aparente fatiga al anciano profesor cuando Celia tenía ya los pies yertos y resultaba espantoso ver la calva cabeza del clérigo moviéndose de aquí para allá. ¿Por qué el entusiasmo que el señor Casaubon inspiraba a su hermana no tendría que ser similar al que sintiera por *monsieur* Liret? Y también parecía lógico que todos los hombres doctos adoptasen una actitud más o menos profesoral con los jóvenes.

Pero ahora Celia se sobresaltó de verdad ante la sospecha que la asaltó. Muy pocas veces se veía sorprendida de aquella manera, ya que la maravillosa prontitud con que observaba cierto tipo de signos la preparaba de ordinario para anticipar los acontecimientos que le interesaban. No es que se imaginara ya al señor Casaubon como pretendiente aceptado; tan solo había empezado a sentirse incómoda ante la posibilidad de que los pensamientos de Dorothea se inclinaran en esa dirección. Si así fuera, Dodo conseguiría irritarla de verdad: estaba muy bien que no aceptara a sir James Chettam, pero ¡casarse con el señor Casaubon! Celia sintió una especie de vergüenza mezclada con una sensación de ridículo. Pero quizá se pudiera evitar aún que Dodo hiciera una cosa tan desmedida; la experiencia demostraba que se podía contar a menudo con su impresionabilidad. El día estaba lluvioso y no saldrían a pasear, de manera que subieron las dos a su salita de estar; y allí Celia observó que Dorothea, en lugar de iniciar alguna tarea con

su habitual interés y diligencia, se limitaba a apoyar el codo sobre un libro abierto y a mirar por la ventana al gran cedro al que la humedad prestaba reflejos plateados. Ella, por su parte, había emprendido la fabricación de un juguete para los hijos del vicario y no tenía intención de abordar tema alguno de forma precipitada.

Dorothea pensaba de hecho en la conveniencia de que Celia estuviese al tanto del cambio trascendental que habían experimentado sus relaciones con el señor Casaubon desde su última visita a Tipton Grange; no parecía justo mantenerla en la ignorancia de algo que necesariamente modificaría su actitud hacia él; pero era imposible no acobardarse al pensar en su reacción. Dorothea se acusó de mezquindad por aquella timidez; siempre le parecía odioso que sus acciones le inspirasen pequeños miedos o crearan la necesidad de fingimientos, pero en aquel momento pidió la ayuda de lo alto para enfrentarse con la causticidad de la prosa mundana de Celia. Pero la voz nada potente y más bien gutural de su hermana, hablándole con su tono habitual, el tono de quien hace una observación casual o precedida de un «por cierto», truncó sus sueños y le evitó la dificultad de tener que tomar una decisión.

—¿Viene alguien a cenar, aparte del señor Casaubon?

—No, que yo sepa.

—Espero que haya alguien más, para no tener que oírle tomar la sopa.

—¿Qué tiene de extraordinario su manera de tomar la sopa?

—Por favor, Dodo, ¿me vas a decir que no oyes el ruido que hace al sorberla? Y siempre parpadea antes de hablar. No sé si Locke parpadeaba, pero si es que lo hacía, lo siento por los que se sentaban frente a él.

—Celia —dijo Dorothea con marcada seriedad—, por favor, te ruego que no hagas más observaciones como esas.

—¿Por qué no? Solo digo la verdad —respondió Celia, que tenía sus razones para perseverar, aunque empezaba a sentir un poco de miedo.

—Hay muchas cosas ciertas en las que solo se fijan los espíritus vulgares.

—En ese caso creo que los espíritus vulgares deben de ser bastante útiles. En mi opinión, es una lástima que la madre del señor Casaubon no tuviera un espíritu más vulgar: podría haberlo educado mejor. —Celia estaba asustada en realidad y dispuesta a salir corriendo después de haber arrojado aquella jabalina de poco peso.

Los sentimientos de Dorothea habían ido acumulándose hasta provocar una avalancha, y ya no era posible mayor preparación.

—Debo decirte, Celia, que me he prometido en matrimonio con el señor Casaubon.

Quizá Celia no se había puesto nunca tan pálida. El muñeco de papel que estaba fabricando habría perdido una pierna de no haber sido por su habitual delicadeza con todo lo que tenía entre las manos. Inmediatamente se desprendió de la frágil figura y permaneció completamente inmóvil durante unos momentos. Cuando habló se le empezaban a agolpar las lágrimas.

—Oh, Dodo, espero que seas feliz. —Su ternura de hermana no podía por menos de superar en aquel instante cualquier otro sentimiento, y sus temores eran únicamente los temores del afecto.

Dorothea se sentía aún herida y molesta.

—Entonces, ¿está completamente decidido? —dijo Celia en voz muy baja, llena de temor reverente—. ¿Lo sabe el tío?

—He aceptado el ofrecimiento del señor Casaubon. El tío trajo la carta, pero lo sabía de antemano.

—Te pido perdón si he dicho algo que te haya ofendido, Dodo —dijo Celia conteniendo apenas un sollozo. Nunca hubiera creído que sus sentimientos fuesen a ser los que estaba experimentando. Todo aquello tenía algo de fúnebre, y el señor Casaubon parecía el clérigo oficiante, sobre quien resultaría de muy mal gusto hacer comentarios.

—No tiene importancia, Kitty, no sufras. Tú y yo nunca admiraremos a las mismas personas. A menudo ofendo a los demás por esa misma razón; es muy fácil que hable con demasiada brusquedad de las personas con las que no simpatizo.

A pesar de aquella manifestación de magnanimidad, Dorothea estaba aún dolida, quizá tanto por el asombro mal disimulado de Celia como por sus pequeñas críticas. Era evidente que todo el mundo vinculado a Tipton vería con malos ojos aquel matrimonio. Dorothea no sabía de nadie que pensara como ella sobre la vida y sus objetivos más importantes.

Sin embargo, antes de que terminara la velada la señorita Brooke se sentía muy feliz. Durante un *tête-à-tête* de una hora con el señor Casaubon, habló con más libertad que nunca, derramando incluso a borbotones su alegría ante la idea de consagrarse a su prometido y de aprender a compartir todos sus grandes proyectos, y de ayudarle a realizarlos. El señor Casaubon experimentó un placer desconocido (¿a

qué hombre no le hubiera sucedido lo mismo?) ante aquel entusiasmo infantil y espontáneo; no le sorprendió (¿a qué pretendiente con éxito le hubiera sorprendido?) ser objeto de sentimientos tan cálidos.

—Mi querida joven… señorita Brooke… ¡Dorothea! —dijo, estrechándole las manos entre las suyas—; nunca imaginé que una felicidad semejante me estuviera reservada. Jamás creí que llegara a encontrar una persona con cualidades suficientes para hacer deseable el matrimonio. Posees todas las virtudes que siempre he considerado atributos característicos de la feminidad, y más aún incluso. El gran encanto de tu sexo es la capacidad para sentir un ardiente y abnegado afecto, y en ello vemos su idoneidad para proteger y completar la existencia del nuestro. Hasta ahora he conocido muy pocos placeres, con la excepción de algunos de carácter muy adusto; mis satisfacciones han sido las del estudioso solitario. Antes me sentía muy poco inclinado a coger flores que pudieran marchitárseme entre las manos, pero ahora las arrancaré con ansia para colocarlas sobre tu pecho.

Nadie podría haber pronunciado unas palabras más absolutamente sinceras en su intención; la gélida retórica del final era tan franca como el ladrido de un perro o el graznido de un cuervo enamorado. ¿No sería precipitado concluir que no existe verdadera pasión en esos sonetos a Delia[19] que nos recuerdan la insignificante música de una mandolina?

La fe de Dorothea añadió todo lo que las palabras del señor Casaubon parecían dejar sin decir; ¿qué creyente advierte una inquietante omisión o un desacierto expresivo? El texto, tanto si se trata de un profeta como de un vate, admite todo lo que se quiera incluir en él, e incluso su gramática deficiente resulta sublime.

—Soy muy ignorante… Te maravillará mi ignorancia —dijo Dorothea—. Tengo muchas ideas que quizá estén por completo equivocadas, y ahora te las podré exponer y hacerte preguntas acerca de ellas. Pero —añadió, imaginándose en seguida los probables sentimientos del señor Casaubon—, no te molestaré demasiado, solo lo haré cuando te sientas inclinado a escucharme. A menudo quedarás agotado resolviendo los problemas que te presenten tus investigaciones. Me daré por satisfecha si accedes a compartirlos conmigo.

—¿Cómo podría yo ahora perseverar en ninguna senda sin tu compañía? —dijo el señor Casaubon, besándola en la frente y convencido de que el cielo le había concedido un don en perfecta armonía con sus peculiares necesidades. Le afectaban de manera inconsciente los encantos de un ser incapaz de cálculo, tanto para consecuencias inmediatas como para fines más remotos. Era aquello lo que hacía tan infantil a Dorothea y, según algunos críticos, tan estúpida, a pesar de su supuesta inteligencia; como, por ejemplo, en la presente ocasión, al arrojarse (hablando metafóricamente) a los pies del señor Casaubon para besarle los cordones pasados de moda de sus zapatos, como si fuera un Papa protestante. No impulsaba en lo más mínimo al señor Casaubon a preguntarse si estaba en condiciones de hacerla feliz; todo su afán era ponerse a la altura del señor Casaubon. Antes de que el erudito clérigo se marchara a la mañana siguiente ya se había decidido que el matrimonio se celebrara en el plazo de seis semanas. ¿Por qué no? La casa del señor Casaubon estaba preparada. No era una rectoría, sino una mansión con muchas tierras anexas. La rectoría estaba ocupada por el vicario, que tenía a su cargo todas las tareas pastorales, a excepción del sermón dominical.

Capítulo VI

La lengua de mi señora es como las hierbas del prado,
que cortan cuando se las acaricia distraídamente.
Cortar con exactitud es su función: divide
con filo espiritual la semilla de mijo,
y consigue ahorros intangibles.

El coche del señor Casaubon, al atravesar el portalón de Tipton Grange, obligó a detenerse a un faetón tirado por un solo caballo y conducido por una dama con un criado sentado detrás. Cabe dudar de que el reconocimiento fuese mutuo, porque el señor Casaubon miraba hacia adelante con aire ausente; pero la señora tenía buena vista y le obsequió con una inclinación de cabeza y un «¿cómo está usted?» muy a tiempo. A pesar de lo gastado de su sombrero y de su viejísimo chal, era evidente que la guardesa la consideraba un personaje importante, a juzgar por la profunda reverencia con que recibió la entrada del pequeño faetón.

—Bueno, señora Fitchett, ¿qué tal se portan ahora sus gallinas? —dijo la rubicunda señora de ojos oscuros, pronunciando todas las palabras con gran claridad y precisión.

—En cuanto a poner, no me quejo, señora, pero les ha dado por comerse sus huevos; así que no tengo ninguna tranquilidad con ellas.

—¡Vaya caníbales! Será mejor que las venda baratas en seguida. ¿Cuánto pide por una pareja? No se puede comer aves de mal carácter a un precio muy alto.

—Media corona, señora; no me desprendería de ellas por menos.

—¡Media corona, con los tiempos que corren! Vamos, vamos, son para el caldo que se toma el rector los domingos. Ya ha consumido todas las que había en casa. Y recuerde que queda usted pagada a medias con el sermón, señora Fitchett. Llévese a cambio una pareja de palomas acróbatas. Venga a verlas. No tiene usted ninguna.

—Bien, señora, mi marido irá a verlas después del trabajo. Le interesan mucho las especies nuevas: por darle gusto a usted.

—¡Darme gusto! Será la mejor ganga que se lleve en su vida. ¡Dos palomas de iglesia por una pareja de malvadas gallinas españolas que se comen los huevos que ponen! ¡No presuman más de la cuenta usted y Fitchett, eso es lo que tienen que hacer!

El faetón reanudó la marcha con aquellas últimas palabras, mientras la señora Fitchett reía y agitaba la cabeza lentamente, diciendo un «¡claro, claro, no faltaba más!» del que podía deducirse que el mundo le habría parecido bastante más aburrido si la esposa del rector hubiese tenido una lengua menos afilada y hubiera sido un poco menos tacaña. De hecho, tanto los granjeros como los jornaleros de las parroquias de Freshitt y Tipton habrían tenido poco de que hablar de no haber sido por las historias sobre lo que la señora Cadwallader decía o hacía: una dama de nacimiento inconmensurablemente aristocrático, descendiente, por así decirlo, de condes desconocidos, tan borrosos como la multitud de las sombras heroicas; una dama que se confesaba pobre, que regateaba y hacía chistes de la manera más afable, aunque con una lengua tan afilada que nunca era posible olvidar quién era. Una señora así daba un tono amable a la jerarquía y a la religión y quitaba hierro a la amargura de unos diezmos que seguían sin disminuir. Otro personaje mucho más ejemplar, pero con un componente de dignidad desabrida, no habría mejorado la comprensión que tenían los feligreses de los treinta y nueve artículos[20] y hubiese contribuido menos a la cohesión social.

El señor Brooke, que veía los méritos de la señora Cadwallader desde una perspectiva diferente, dio un leve respingo en la biblioteca, donde se hallaba a solas, cuando vinieron a anunciarle su visita.

—Ya veo que ha tenido aquí a nuestro Cicerón de Lowick —dijo ella, sentándose cómodamente y mostrando, al quitarse el chal, una figura escueta pero bien proporcionada—. Sospecho que están ustedes fabricando algún indigesto brebaje político, porque de lo contrario no vería usted con tanta frecuencia a ese hombre tan animado. Estoy dispuesta a denunciarlo: recuerde que son ustedes personajes sospechosos desde que apoyaron a Peel en el asunto de la ley sobre los católicos. Le diré a todo el mundo que se presentará usted por Middlemarch con los *whigs* cuando el viejo Pinkerton dimita y que Casaubon va a ayudarle a escondidas, sobornando a los electores con panfletos y entrando en las tabernas para distribuirlos. ¡Vamos, confiese!

—Nada de eso —dijo el señor Brooke, sonriendo y frotándose los cristales de las gafas, pero en realidad sonrojándose un poco ante aquella denuncia—. Casaubon y yo no hablamos mucho de política. Apenas le interesa el lado filantrópico de la vida, ni las condenas y otras cosas por el estilo. Solo le preocupan los problemas de la Iglesia. Y esa no es mi línea de actuación, ya lo sabe usted.

—Yo diría que más de la cuenta, amigo mío. ¿Quién vendió un trozo de tierra a los papistas en Middlemarch? Creo que lo compró usted a propósito y que es un perfecto Guy Faux[21]. Tenga cuidado no sea que lo quemen en efigie el próximo cinco de noviembre. Humphrey no vendría a pelearse con usted por eso, de manera que he venido yo.

—Muy bien. Estaba preparado para que me persiguieran por no perseguir… no perseguir, ya se da cuenta.

—¡Ahí lo tiene! Eso es un ejemplo de la retórica populachera que tiene usted preparada para las elecciones. Pero, mi querido señor Brooke, no permita que lo seduzcan para presentarse. Un hombre siempre hace el ridículo cuando lanza discursos; no hay otra solución que estar con los que escuchan para que a uno lo disculpen cuando tartamudea. Se perderá usted, se lo advierto. Hará un revoltillo con las opiniones de todos los partidos, y todo el mundo lo despellejará.

—Eso es lo que espero, claro está —dijo el señor Brooke, nada deseoso de dejar traslucir lo poco que le había gustado aquel esbozo profético—. Lo que espero como hombre independiente. En cuanto a los *whigs*, una persona que se interesa por los que piensan no es probable que se enganche a ningún partido. Puede ir con ellos hasta cierto punto… hasta cierto punto, ¿se da cuenta? Pero eso es lo que ustedes, las señoras, no entienden nunca.

—¿Dónde está su cierto punto? No; me gustaría que me dijeran cómo un hombre puede llegar a ese cierto punto sin pertenecer a ningún partido… llevando una vida errante y sin informar a los amigos de su paradero. «Nadie sabe dónde estará Brooke… No se puede contar con Brooke…», eso es lo que la gente dice de usted, si he de serle sincera. Vamos, haga el favor de volverse respetable. ¿Qué tal le parecería ir a las sesiones de la magistratura con todo el mundo mirándolo de reojo y usted con mala conciencia y el bolsillo vacío?

—No pretendo discutir con una señora sobre política —dijo el señor Brooke sonriendo indiferente pero con la desagradable sensación de que el ataque de la señora Cadwallader suponía el comienzo del aluvión de críticas al que ciertas decisiones imprudentes le hacían acreedor—. Las personas de su sexo no se paran a pensar, ya sabe… *Varium et mutabile semper*… cosas por el estilo. No conoce usted a Virgilio. Yo… —El señor Brooke se dio cuenta a tiempo de que tampoco él había conocido al poeta latino—. Iba a decir, pobre Stoddart[22], ya sabe. Eso es lo que él dijo. Ustedes, las señoras, siempre critican una actitud de independencia… un hombre al que solo le importa la verdad y cosas así. Y no hay otra zona del condado donde las opiniones sean más intolerantes que aquí… No quiero ser un inconformista, pero alguien tiene que adoptar la postura independiente; y si no lo hago yo, ¿quién querrá hacerlo?

—¿Quién? Cualquier advenedizo sin alcurnia ni posición. Las personas de categoría debieran consumir en casa su necedad independentista, en lugar de pregonarla por la calle. Y usted sobre todo, que está a punto de casar a su sobrina, que es como si fuese su hija, con uno de nuestros mejores hombres. Sir James se disgustará muchísimo: va a ser muy duro para él que dé usted media vuelta y se convierta en tablón de anuncios para los *whigs*.

El señor Brooke dio de nuevo un respingo en su interior, porque nada más decidirse el compromiso de Dorothea, ya había pensado en los futuros sarcasmos de la señora Cadwallader. A los observadores ignorantes les hubiese sido fácil decir: «Peléese con la señora Cadwallader»; pero ¿qué destino le espera a un caballero rural que riñe con sus vecinos más antiguos? ¿Quién podría gustar el delicado sabor del apellido Brooke si se pronunciaba con indiferencia, como si se tratara de un vino sin precinto? Sin duda solo se puede ser cosmopolita hasta cierto punto.

—Espero que Chettam y yo seamos siempre buenos amigos; pero siento decir que no hay esperanzas de que se case con mi sobrina —dijo el señor Brooke, muy aliviado al mirar por la ventana y ver que Celia se disponía a entrar en la casa.

—¿Por qué no? —dijo la señora Cadwallader, muy sorprendida—. No hace aún quince días que usted y yo hablábamos de ello.

—Mi sobrina ha elegido a otro pretendiente… Lo ha elegido, ya sabe lo que son esas cosas. No he tenido nada que ver con ello. Yo hubiera preferido a Chettam y, en mi opinión, cualquier muchacha lo habría elegido. Pero no hay manera de explicar esas cosas. El sexo femenino es caprichoso, ya se sabe.

—Entonces, ¿con quién va usted a permitir que se case? —La señora Cadwallader estaba revisando rápidamente las posibles elecciones de Dorothea.

Pero en aquel momento entró Celia, con excelentes colores después de un paseo por el jardín y, como el intercambio de saludos le evitó la necesidad de responder de inmediato, el señor Brooke se levantó muy de prisa y salió a buen paso de la habitación mientras decía:

—Por cierto, tengo que hablar con Wright sobre los caballos.

—Mi querida niña, ¿qué es lo que pasa? ¿Qué es eso del compromiso de tu hermana? —preguntó la señora Cadwallader.

—Va a casarse con el señor Casaubon —dijo Celia, recurriendo, como de ordinario, a enunciar los hechos con la mayor sencillez posible, contenta además de poder hablar a solas con la esposa del rector.

—Eso es terrible. ¿Desde cuándo?

—Yo me enteré justo ayer. Se van a casar dentro de seis semanas.

—Bien, te deseo mucha felicidad con ese cuñado.

—Lo siento por Dorothea.

—¡Lo sientes! Ha sido obra suya, supongo.

—Sí; dice que el señor Casaubon tiene un alma grande.

—Estoy completamente segura de ello.

—Pues yo no creo que sea agradable casarse con un hombre de alma grande, señora Cadwallader.

—Entonces, aprende la lección. Ya sabes qué aspecto tienen; cuando aparezca el próximo y quiera casarse contigo, no le des el sí.

—Nunca lo haría.

—No, con una en cada familia es suficiente. ¿Así que tu hermana nunca se interesó por sir James Chettam? ¿Qué te hubiese parecido tenerlo por cuñado?

—Me hubiera gustado mucho. Estoy segura de que hubiera sido un buen marido. Aunque —añadió Celia, con un leve sonrojo (a veces parecía ruborizarse con la misma facilidad con que respiraba)—, no creo que le hubiese convenido a Dorothea.

—¿No es lo bastante pomposo?

—Dodo es muy estricta. Piensa mucho en todo y es muy exigente con lo que uno dice. Sir James nunca logra satisfacerla.

—Pero le dio ánimos, estoy segura. Eso no dice mucho en favor suyo.

—No se enfade con Dodo, por favor; mi hermana no ve las cosas como son en realidad. Le interesaban muchísimo las viviendas y a veces ha sido descortés con sir James; pero él es tan buena persona que nunca se ha dado cuenta.

—Bien —dijo la señora Cadwallader, poniéndose el chal y levantándose del asiento, como si tuviera prisa—, voy a ir directamente a contárselo a sir James. Ya habrá vuelto, trayendo a su madre, y debo hacerles una visita. Tu tío no se lo dirá nunca. Es una gran desilusión para todos nosotros, claro está. Las personas jóvenes deberían pensar en sus familias al casarse. Yo di un mal ejemplo: me casé con un clérigo pobre y me convertí en objeto de compasión para los De Bracy; después me he visto obligada a conseguir el carbón mediante estratagemas y a mendigar del cielo el aceite para la ensalada. A Casaubon, sin embargo, no le falta el dinero; tengo que hacerle justicia. En cuanto a su linaje, supongo que los cuarteles del escudo de su familia son tres calamares sobre fondo negro y un comentarista rampante. Por cierto, antes de irme he de hablar con vuestra señora Carter de repostería. Quiero enviarle a mi joven cocinera para que le enseñe. Las personas pobres con cuatro hijos, como nosotros, no se pueden permitir una buena cocinera. Estoy segura de que la señora Carter me hará ese favor. La cocinera de sir James se pone en seguida como una hidra.

En menos de una hora la señora Cadwallader había embaucado a la señora Carter, y se dirigió después a Freshitt Hall, que no estaba lejos de su propia rectoría, ya que su marido era el residente de Freshitt y mantenía a un vicario en Tipton.

Sir James Chettam acababa de regresar de un breve viaje que le había tenido ausente durante un par de días y en seguida se cambió de ropa con intención de acercarse a caballo a Tipton Grange. Cuando llegó la señora Cadwallader su montura se hallaba junto a la puerta, e inmediatamente apareció él en persona, con la fusta en la mano. Lady Chettam no había regresado aún, pero la esposa del rector no podía dar la noticia en presencia de criados, de manera que pidió que se trasladaran al invernadero, que estaba muy cerca, para ver las nuevas plantas; y nada más adoptar una actitud contemplativa dijo:

—Tengo una sorpresa muy desagradable para usted; espero que no esté tan enamorado como asegura.

No servía de nada protestar por la manera en que la señora Cadwallader decía las cosas. Pero la expresión de sir James se modificó ligeramente mientras le invadía una vaga sensación de alarma.

—Creo que Brooke terminará por hacer el ridículo. Le he acusado de estar dispuesto a presentarse por Middlemarch del lado liberal y ha puesto cara de inocente, pero no lo ha negado… No ha hecho más que hablar de la línea independiente y de las tonterías de siempre.

—¿Eso es todo? —dijo sir James, sintiendo un gran alivio.

—¡Vaya! —replicó la señora Cadwallader, con tono más cortante—, ¿no me irá a decir que le gustaría verlo convertido en hombre público de esa manera… transformado en una especie de buhonero de la política?

—Creo que será posible disuadirle. No le harán gracia los gastos que exige una elección.

—Eso es lo que yo le he dicho. Por ese lado sí que es vulnerable… Siempre hay unas gotas de sentido común en una onza de tacañería. Es muy necesaria una veta de tacañería en todas las familias; eso hace que la locura, cuando aparece, resulte mucho menos peligrosa. Y algo de especial debe de tener la familia Brooke, porque de lo contrario no veríamos lo que vamos a ver.

—¿Se refiere a Brooke presentándose a las elecciones por Middlemarch?

—Algo peor. He de confesar que me siento un poco responsable. Siempre le he dicho a usted que la señorita Brooke sería un gran partido. No ignoraba que había en ella una buena dosis de insensatez… una tendencia un tanto frívola a los excesos metodistas. Pero en las muchachas esas cosas terminan desapareciendo. Por una vez, sin embargo, me he llevado una sorpresa.

—¿De qué está hablando, señora Cadwallader? —dijo sir James. Su temor a que la señorita Brooke se hubiera escapado para unirse a los hermanos moravos, o a alguna otra secta absurda, desconocida de la buena sociedad, se vio un tanto aliviado por el convencimiento de que la señora Cadwallader siempre dramatizaba en exceso—. ¿Qué le ha sucedido a la señorita Brooke? Haga el favor de decírmelo.

—Muy bien. Se ha prometido. —La señora Cadwallader hizo una breve pausa, observando la expresión profundamente dolida de su amigo, que sir James trató de ocultar con una sonrisa nerviosa, mientras se golpeaba la bota con la fusta, pero en seguida añadió——: Prometido a Casaubon.

A sir James se le cayó la fusta y en seguida se agachó para recogerla. Quizá su rostro no había reflejado nunca una repugnancia tan intensa como cuando se volvió a la señora Cadwallader y repitió:

—¿Casaubon?

—Así es. Ya sabe lo que he venido a decirle.

—¡Cielo santo! ¡Qué cosa tan horrible! ¡Si parece una momia! —(Hay que disculpar este punto de vista por tratarse de un desairado rival lleno de vida).

—Dorothea dice que tiene un alma grande. ¡Una gran vejiga llena de guisantes secos que hacen mucho ruido! —dijo la señora Cadwallader.

—¿Qué necesidad tiene de casarse un solterón tan viejo como ese? —dijo sir James—. ¡Si ya está con un pie en la tumba!

—Tendrá intención de sacarlo, supongo.

—Brooke no debiera permitirlo: su obligación es insistir en que la boda se retrase hasta que su sobrina sea mayor de edad. Para entonces lo habrá pensado mejor. ¿De qué sirve un tutor, si no es para eso?

—¡Como si fuera posible conseguir que Brooke tome una decisión!

—Cadwallader podría hablar con él.

—¡No cuente con mi marido! A Humphrey todo el mundo le parece encantador. Nunca consigo que diga nada malo de Casaubon. Habla bien hasta del obispo, aunque yo insisto en que es una cosa contra natura tratándose de un beneficiado; ¿qué se puede hacer con un marido que se preocupa tan poco de las más elementales normas del decoro? Yo procuro disimularlo lo mejor que puedo criticando a todo el mundo. ¡Vamos, vamos, anímese! Ha tenido suerte librándose de la señorita Brooke, una muchacha que le hubiese exigido ver las estrellas con luz de sol. Entre nosotros, la pequeña Celia vale por dos como su hermana y, después de todo, es muy posible que sea el mejor partido. Porque casarse con Casaubon es lo mismo que irse a un convento.

—Por lo que a mí se refiere… pienso en la felicidad de la señorita Brooke cuando digo que sus parientes debieran usar de su influencia.

—Bueno, Humphrey no lo sabe todavía. Pero cuando se lo cuente, esté seguro de que dirá: «¿Por qué no? Casaubon es un buen hombre… y joven… suficientemente joven». Esas personas caritativas nunca distinguen el vinagre del vino hasta que se lo beben y les da cólico. En cualquier caso, si yo fuera hombre preferiría a Celia, especialmente una vez que falta Dorothea. La verdad es que ha estado usted cortejando a una y ha conquistado a la otra. Creo que Celia le mira con muy buenos ojos. Si no fuese yo quien se lo dice podría usted pensar que es una exageración. ¡Hasta la vista!

Sir James ayudó a la señora Cadwallader a subirse al faetón y luego montó a caballo. No iba a renunciar al paseo solo por las desagradables noticias de su amiga…; pero cabalgaría más deprisa en cualquier otra dirección que no fuese la de Tipton Grange.

Ahora bien, ¿qué motivo tenía la señora Cadwallader para ocuparse del matrimonio de la señorita Brooke, y por qué, cuando una boda que ya consideraba cosa hecha se venía abajo, ponía de inmediato en marcha las maniobras preliminares para otra? ¿Existía alguna trama ingeniosa, alguna complicada línea de acción que pudiera detectarse con una cuidadosa observación telescópica? Nada de eso: un telescopio podría haber recorrido las parroquias de Tipton y Freshitt, toda la zona visitada por la señora Cadwallader con su faetón, sin presenciar ninguna entrevista que levantara sospechas, ni escena alguna de la que la esposa del párroco no regresara con la misma imperturbable claridad de visión y el mismo buen color de siempre. De hecho, si tan conveniente medio de transporte hubiera existido en la época de los Siete Sabios, alguno de ellos habría hecho notar, con toda seguridad, que se aprende muy poco de las mujeres limitándose a seguirlas cuando van en sus faetones tirados por un caballo. Incluso con un microscopio dirigido hacia una gota de agua nos descubrimos haciendo interpretaciones que resultan bastante burdas; porque, si bien gracias a una lente poco potente parece verse a una criatura que muestra una activa voracidad en la que con gran dinamismo toman parte otras criaturas más pequeñas, como si fueran monedas magnetizadas, otra lente más poderosa nos revela ciertos filamentos delgadísimos que producen torbellinos para arrastrar a las víctimas, mientras el verdugo aguarda pasivamente para tragárselas, como un funcionario en su puesto de la aduana. De esta manera, hablando metafóricamente, una lente poderosa aplicada a los impulsos casamenteros de la señora Cadwallader pondría de manifiesto un entrecruzamiento de causas sin importancia produciendo lo que cabría denominar torbellinos de pensamiento y de palabras, destinados a proporcionarle el tipo de alimento que necesitaba.

Su vida tenía una simplicidad rural, sin secretos desagradables, peligrosos o de cualquier otro tipo, y no le afectaban de modo consciente los grandes problemas del mundo. Eso hacía que los asuntos de la alta sociedad, cuando sus parientes de rango aristocrático se los comunicaban por carta, le interesaran todavía más: la manera en que hijos muy jóvenes y atractivos habían arruinado su reputación casándose con sus queridas; la delicada imbecilidad llena de alcurnia del joven lord Tapir y el terrible mal genio gotoso de lord Megatherium; el exacto entrecruzamiento de genealogías que había añadido una corona a una nueva rama, ampliando así las dimensiones del escándalo… tales eran los temas cuyos detalles retenía la señora Cadwallader con la mayor precisión imaginable, reproduciéndolos después en un excelente escabeche de epigramas, de los que ella disfrutaba de manera especial porque distinguía entre buenas y malas cunas con tanta precisión como entre caza y alimañas. La señora Cadwallader nunca habría rechazado a nadie en razón de su pobreza: un De Bracy reducido a tomar la cena en un cuenco le parecería un ejemplo de patetismo merecedor de cualquier exageración y mucho me temo que sus aristocráticos vicios no la habrían horrorizado. Pero sus sentimientos hacia los ricos vulgares alcanzaban el nivel del odio que produce el fanatismo religioso: probablemente habían hecho todo su dinero vendiendo al por menor de manera abusiva, y la señora Cadwallader detestaba los precios altos para todo aquello que no se pagara en especie en la rectoría: personas así no formaban parte de los designios divinos al crear el mundo; y su acento era un castigo para los oídos. Una ciudad en la que abundaban semejantes monstruos era poco más que una farsa, algo que no se podía tener en cuenta en una ordenación correcta del universo. Cualquier señora que se sienta inclinada a tratar con dureza a la señora Cadwallader debe investigar la amplitud de sus propias concepciones y estar convencida de que dan cobijo a todas las vidas que tienen el honor de coexistir con la suya.

Con una mente semejante, activa como el fósforo, dando a dentelladas la forma conveniente a todo lo que se ponía a su alcance, ¿cómo podría la señora Cadwallader —especialmente después de haber convertido en costumbre de años sus regañinas al señor Brooke con la más amistosa de las franquezas y de haberle hecho saber en confianza que lo consideraba un pobre hombre— sentirse ajena a las hermanas Brooke y a sus perspectivas matrimoniales? Desde la llegada de las jóvenes a Tipton, la señora Cadwallader

previó el matrimonio de Dorothea con sir James, y si hubiese llegado a celebrarse habría estado completamente segura de que era obra suya; que sus previsiones no se cumplieran le causaba una irritación que comprenderán todas las personas con capacidad pensante. La esposa del rector era la cabeza diplomática de Tipton y Freshitt, y cualquier cosa que sucediera a pesar suyo constituía una insufrible irregularidad. En cuanto a rarezas como la de la señorita Brooke, su actitud era inflexible y ahora se daba cuenta de que su opinión sobre Dorothea se había dejado contagiar en parte por la indiscriminada benevolencia de su marido: los caprichos metodistas, los aires de ser más religiosa que el rector y el vicario juntos, procedían de una enfermedad mucho más profunda y somática de lo que ella había estado dispuesta a creer.

—Por consiguiente —dijo la señora Cadwallader, primero hablando consigo misma y después con su marido—, no quiero saber nada más de Dorothea; tenía la posibilidad, si se hubiese casado con sir James, de convertirse en una mujer sana y razonable. Él nunca le hubiera llevado la contraria y, cuando a una mujer no se le lleva la contraria, deja de tener motivos para obstinarse en sus disparates. Pero ahora le deseo que sea muy feliz con su cilicio.

La señora Cadwallader tenía que encontrar, en consecuencia, otro buen partido para sir James y, una vez convencida de que habría de ser la menor de las dos hermanas, la jugada más habilidosa para lograr el éxito de su plan fue informar al baronet de la impresión que había causado en el corazón de Celia. Porque sir James no era uno de esos caballeros que se consumen tratando en vano de alcanzar la manzana de Safo, que se burla de ellos desde la rama más alta y cuyos encantos

sonríen como el haz de prímulas en el despeñadero,
inasibles para la mano deseosa.

No era lo suyo escribir sonetos y tenía que resultarle desagradable no hallar respuesta a sus anhelos en la mujer que había elegido. Saber que Dorothea estaba comprometida con el señor Casaubon había enfriado su afecto, debilitando la influencia que tenía sobre él la mayor de las dos hermanas. Aunque sir James era un hombre de espíritu deportivo, las mujeres le inspiraban sentimientos algo distintos a los zorros y los urogallos, y no consideraba a su futura esposa como una posible presa, valiosa sobre todo por la emoción de la caza. Tampoco estaba tan familiarizado con las costumbres de las razas primitivas para creer que un espectacular combate, tomahawk en mano, por así decirlo, fuese necesario para la continuidad histórica de la institución matrimonial. Como no carecía en cambio de la amable vanidad que nos liga a aquellos que nos quieren y nos distancia de aquellos a quienes somos indiferentes, y poseía además una naturaleza agradecida, la simple idea de que una mujer lo mirase con afecto tejía delicados hilos de ternura entre su corazón y el de ella.

Sucedió así que después de cabalgar con ardor durante media hora en una dirección que le alejaba de Tipton Grange, sir James aminoró la marcha y finalmente tomó un atajo que llevaba hacia allí en línea recta. Diferentes sentimientos fraguaron en él la determinación de ir aquel día a Tipton Grange como si nada hubiera sucedido. Celebraba no haber llegado a declararse y no haberse visto rechazado; la simple cortesía de una relación amistosa requería que visitase a Dorothea a propósito de las viviendas, y por fortuna la señora Cadwallader le había preparado ya para felicitarla, en el caso de que resultara necesario, sin mostrarse demasiado afectado. Sin duda le desagradaba; renunciar a Dorothea era muy doloroso; pero algo en la decisión de hacer aquella visita de inmediato y evitar toda manifestación de sentimientos heridos la convertía en una especie de revulsivo. Y sin que él reconociera con claridad el impulso, también estaba presente el convencimiento de que encontraría allí a Celia y de que prestaría más atención que otras veces a la menor de las hermanas.

Nosotros los mortales, hombres y mujeres, devoramos muchas desilusiones entre el desayuno y la hora de la cena; contenemos las lágrimas, palidecemos un poco, y al contestar a las preguntas decimos: «No, ¡no me pasa nada!». Nos ayuda el orgullo; y el orgullo no es una cosa mala cuando nos impulsa a ocultar nuestras heridas… en lugar de a hacer daño a otros.

Capítulo VII

Piacer e popone
Vuol la sua stagione[23]

Refrán italiano

Como podía esperarse, el señor Casaubon pasó buena parte de su tiempo en Tipton Grange durante aquellas semanas, y los retrasos que cortejar a su prometida ocasionaban a la marcha de su gran obra —la *Llave de todas las mitologías*— le hacían lógicamente desear con mayor intensidad la feliz conclusión de aquel período. Pero, de todas formas, aceptó con gusto tales retrasos, convencido de que había llegado el momento de adornar su vida con los placeres de la compañía femenina, e iluminar así, gracias al despliegue de la fantasía del sexo débil, la tristeza que la fatiga podía producirle en los intervalos de descanso entre jornadas de trabajo erudito, asegurándose con ello, en la plena madurez, el solaz de las atenciones femeninas para los últimos años de su vida. De aquí que decidiera abandonarse a la corriente del sentimiento, sorprendiéndose quizá al descubrir que se trataba de un arroyuelo muy poco profundo. De la misma manera que en regiones áridas el bautismo por inmersión solo se lleva a cabo simbólicamente, el señor Casaubon descubrió que unas cuantas salpicaduras eran lo más parecido a una zambullida que su propio cauce estaba en condiciones de proporcionarle; y llegó a la conclusión de que los poetas exageraban mucho la intensidad de la pasión varonil. Observó, sin embargo, con placer, que la señorita Brooke manifestaba un ardiente y sumiso afecto que prometía colmar sus más agradables previsiones sobre el matrimonio. En una o dos ocasiones se le cruzó por la cabeza la idea de que posiblemente existiese alguna deficiencia en Dorothea que explicara lo moderado de su propia entrega, pero no logró percibir tal deficiencia ni imaginar por su cuenta una mujer que pudiera haberle complacido más; quedaba claro que la única explicación posible eran las exageraciones de la tradición.

—¿No podría prepararme ahora para ser más útil? —le dijo Dorothea una mañana, muy al principio de su noviazgo—; ¿no podría aprender a leerte en latín y en griego, como hicieron con su padre las hijas de Milton, aun sin entender lo que leían?

—Temo que te resultara muy pesado —dijo el señor Casaubon sonriendo—; y, de hecho, si no recuerdo mal, las jóvenes que acabas de mencionar consideraron ese ejercicio, por tratarse de lenguas que desconocían, motivo para rebelarse contra el poeta.

—Sí; pero sin duda tenían muy mal corazón, porque de lo contrario se hubieran sentido orgullosas de servir a semejante padre; y además podrían haber estudiado por su cuenta y aprendido a entender lo que leían, y entonces les hubiese resultado interesante. Confío en que no me consideres estúpida ni creas que tengo mal corazón.

—Espero que seas todo lo que una joven exquisita puede ser en cualquier cosa que se relacione con la vida humana. Sin duda sería de gran utilidad que pudieras copiar los caracteres griegos, y para ello estaría bien empezar con un poco de lectura.

Dorothea consideró de inestimable valor aquel permiso. Nunca se habría atrevido a pedir al señor Casaubon que le enseñara las lenguas clásicas, temerosa sobre todo de ser una carga en lugar de resultar útil; pero su deseo de aprender latín y griego no procedía únicamente de la devoción a su futuro marido. Aquellas zonas del saber masculino le parecían una tierra firme desde donde todas las verdades podían verse con mayor claridad. De hecho, Dorothea dudaba siempre de sus propias conclusiones porque era

consciente de su ignorancia: ¿cómo podía estar segura de que las viviendas con una sola habitación no contribuían a la gloria de Dios, cuando hombres que conocían a los clásicos parecían conciliar la indiferencia por las casas de los arrendatarios con el celo por la gloria divina? Cabía incluso que fuese necesario el hebreo —por lo menos el alfabeto y unas cuantas raíces— para llegar al meollo de las cosas, y juzgar así debidamente cuáles son los deberes sociales del cristiano. Y Dorothea no había llegado aún al grado de renuncia que le hubiera permitido sentirse satisfecha por el hecho de tener un marido sabio: quería, pobre criatura, ser sabia también ella. La señorita Brooke era en realidad bien ingenua a pesar de toda su pretendida inteligencia. Celia, a quien nunca se había considerado intelectualmente bien dotada, discernía mucho antes cuándo las aspiraciones de otras personas eran simples quimeras. En determinadas ocasiones, tener poca sensibilidad parece la única forma segura de no dejarse arrastrar por el sentimiento.

Fuera como fuese, lo cierto es que el señor Casaubon consintió en escuchar y enseñar a Dorothea por espacio de una hora, como un maestro de párvulos o, más bien, como un amante para quien la elemental ignorancia y las dificultades de la amada poseen un tierno encanto. A pocos estudiosos les habría disgustado enseñar el alfabeto en aquellas circunstancias. Pero la misma Dorothea se sintió un poco sorprendida y desanimada ante su propia estupidez, y las respuestas que obtuvo a ciertas tímidas preguntas sobre el valor de los acentos griegos le hicieron sospechar que allí, en efecto, existían quizá secretos que quedaban fuera de la capacidad femenina de raciocinio.

El señor Brooke no tenía la menor duda sobre aquel punto, y expresó su opinión con la energía que le caracterizaba al entrar cierto día en la biblioteca cuando su sobrina estaba leyendo.

—Pero, veamos, Casaubon, esos estudios tan profundos, lenguas clásicas, matemáticas, cosas así, son demasiado fatigosos para una mujer… demasiado agotadores, ¿no es cierto?

—Dorothea está aprendiendo simplemente a leer los caracteres —dijo el señor Casaubon, soslayando la pregunta—. Ha tenido la idea, llena de delicadeza, de ahorrar cansancio a mis ojos.

—¡Ah, bien!, sin entender, claro… Quizá eso no sea tan malo. Pero hay una ligereza en la mente femenina… un rápido vaivén… música, bellas artes, cosas así… deberían estudiarlas hasta cierto punto, eso es lo que les va a las mujeres, pero sin profundizar demasiado, ya me entiende. Una mujer debe ser capaz de sentarse y tocar o cantar una vieja melodía inglesa. Eso es lo que a mí me gusta; aunque lo he oído casi todo… He estado en la ópera de Viena: Gluck, Mozart, cosas así. Pero soy conservador en música… No es lo mismo que las ideas, ya me entiende. Prefiero las buenas melodías antiguas.

—Al señor Casaubon no le gusta el piano, de lo cual me alegro mucho —dijo Dorothea, cuyo escaso respeto por la música popular y por la versión femenina de las bellas artes se le debe perdonar, considerando el insignificante tintineo y el embadurnar de cuadernos de dibujo a que básicamente quedaban reducidas durante aquella época de oscuridad. Luego sonrió y alzó la vista hacia su prometido con los ojos llenos de agradecimiento. Si el señor Casaubon le hubiera pedido a cada momento que tocara la *Última rosa del verano*, Dorothea habría necesitado de mucha resignación—. Me ha explicado que en Lowick solo hay un viejo clavicordio, y que está cubierto de libros.

—¡Ah!, en eso le vas a la zaga a Celia, querida. Tu hermana toca encantadoramente y está siempre dispuesta a hacerlo. Aunque si a Casaubon no le gusta, no hay que preocuparse. Pero es una pena que no tenga usted pequeños esparcimientos de ese tipo, Casaubon: el arco siempre tenso… Esas cosas, ya me entiende, no dan buenos resultados.

—Nunca he logrado considerar un esparcimiento que mis oídos se vean importunados por ruidos rítmicos —dijo el señor Casaubon—. Una melodía repetida muchas veces tiene el ridículo efecto de hacer que las palabras ejecuten en mi cabeza una especie de minueto para llevar el compás… efecto difícilmente tolerable, creo yo, pasada la adolescencia. En cuanto a la formas más nobles de la música, dignas de acompañar solemnes celebraciones, e incluso de servir como influencia educadora según la concepción antigua, no digo nada, porque no nos interesan ahora de manera inmediata.

—No; pero con ese tipo de música sí que disfrutaría —dijo Dorothea—. Cuando volvíamos a Inglaterra desde Lausana, el tío nos llevó a oír el gran órgano de Friburgo, y no pude contener las lágrimas.

—Esas cosas no son saludables, querida —dijo el señor Brooke—. Casaubon, desde ahora mi sobrina va a estar en sus manos: debe usted enseñarle a tomarse las cosas con más calma, ¿eh, Dorothea?

Terminó con una sonrisa, deseoso de no herirla, pero pensando realmente que quizá era mejor para ella casarse pronto con un individuo tan serio como Casaubon, dado que no quería saber nada de Chettam.

«Es sorprendente, de todas formas —se dijo mientras salía de la habitación arrastrando los pies—, es sorprendente que a mi sobrina le guste ese hombre. Se trata, sin embargo, de un buen partido. Me habría extralimitado si hubiese tratado de impedir ese matrimonio, pese a lo que diga la señora Cadwallader. Es casi seguro que llegue a obispo, el tal Casaubon. Fue un folleto muy oportuno el que publicó sobre la

cuestión del catolicismo: por lo menos deán. ¡Qué menos que hacerlo deán!».

Y aquí tengo que reclamar el derecho a una reflexión filosófica, observando que en aquella ocasión el señor Brooke no pensó en absoluto en el discurso de carácter radical que, en un período posterior, llegaría a pronunciar él mismo sobre los ingresos de los obispos. ¿Qué elegante historiador desdeñaría la oportunidad de señalar que sus héroes no previeron ni la historia del mundo, ni siquiera sus propias acciones? Que, por ejemplo, Enrique de Navarra, siendo bebé protestante, jamás imaginó que se convertiría en monarca católico; o que Alfredo el Grande, cuando medía sus noches de trabajo por las velas consumidas, no pensó en los futuros caballeros que medirían sus días de ociosidad con relojes. He aquí una mina de verdades que, por muy vigorosamente que trabajemos en ella, durará probablemente más que nuestro carbón.

Pero acerca del señor Brooke voy a hacer una observación más, quizá menos garantizada por otros precedentes, y se trata de que incluso el hecho de conocer de antemano su futuro discurso no hubiera cambiado mucho las cosas. Pensar con satisfacción en que el marido de su sobrina tuviera unos ingresos muy saneados era una cosa y otra muy distinta pronunciar un discurso liberal; y una persona incapaz de ver un asunto cualquiera desde diferentes puntos de vista tiene una mentalidad muy estrecha.

Capítulo VIII

¡Rescátela! Yo soy ya su hermano,
y usted su padre. Todas las doncellas bien nacidas
han de tener en cada caballero un protector.

Superada la dificultad de ver por vez primera a Dorothea como prometida de otro hombre, sir James Chettam comprobó con agrado que le seguía gustando ir a Tipton Grange. Sintió por supuesto el relámpago de los celos al acercarse a ella la primera vez, y tuvo conciencia durante toda la conversación de un oculto desasosiego; pero, a pesar de su buen corazón, debe reconocerse que su malestar habría sido mayor si hubiera creído que su rival era un excelente partido, sumamente codiciable. No tuvo la menor sensación de quedar eclipsado por el señor Casaubon; tan solo le disgustaba que Dorothea se hallase bajo el influjo de un melancólico espejismo, y su humillación le resultó menos amarga al mezclarla en parte con la compasión.

De todas formas, aunque sir James se decía que había renunciado a la señorita Brooke por completo, al despreciar ella con la perversidad de una Desdémona un matrimonio a todas luces conveniente y de acuerdo con la naturaleza de las cosas, no logró adoptar una actitud completamente pasiva ante la idea de su compromiso con el señor Casaubon. El día en que, conocedor ya de su nueva situación, los vio juntos por vez primera, le pareció que no se había tomado aquel asunto suficientemente en serio. Brooke era realmente culpable; debería haberse opuesto. Alguien tendría que hablar con él. Quizá se pudiera hacer algo, aunque solo fuese retrasar la boda. Camino de su casa entró en la rectoría y preguntó por el señor Cadwallader. Afortunadamente el rector estaba en casa, y el criado hizo pasar al visitante a su despacho, de cuyas paredes colgaban todos sus aparejos de pesca, si bien el señor Cadwallader se hallaba en un cuartito adjunto, trabajando en el torno, y llamó a sir James para que fuera a verlo allí. Los dos eran mejores amigos que ningún otro terrateniente y clérigo del condado: un dato importante, que estaba de acuerdo con la cordial expresión de sus rostros.

El señor Cadwallader era un hombre alto y corpulento, de labios carnosos y sonrisa dulce; sencillo y tosco en su aspecto exterior, tenía esa serenidad y ese buen humor tan imperturbables que resultan contagiosos y que, como las grandes colinas cubiertas de hierba brillando al sol, calman incluso un egoísmo exasperado y hacen que se avergüence de sí mismo.

—¡Vaya! ¿Qué tal está usted? —dijo el rector, extendiendo una mano no del todo idónea para un apretón—. Siento que no me encontrara la última vez. ¿Sucede algo especial? Parece usted preocupado.

Sir James tenía algo fruncido el entrecejo y dio la impresión de acentuar el fruncimiento al contestar.

—Se trata tan solo del comportamiento de Brooke. Creo sinceramente que alguien debiera hablar con él.

—¿Cómo? ¿Se refiere usted a presentarse a las elecciones? —dijo el señor Cadwallader, continuando el arreglo de los carretes que acababa de tornear—. No creo que llegue a hacerlo. Pero ¿qué hay de malo en ello, si le gusta? Todos los que estén en desacuerdo con los *whigs* deberían alegrarse de que no elijan al candidato más capaz. No derribarán la Constitución utilizando como ariete la cabeza de nuestro amigo Brooke.

—No, no; no me refiero a eso —dijo sir James, quien, después de quitarse el sombrero y de dejarse caer sobre una silla, había empezado a tocarse la pierna y a examinar la suela de la bota correspondiente con gran amargura—. Estoy hablando del matrimonio. De permitir que esa joven en la flor de la edad se case con Casaubon.

—¿Qué tiene Casaubon de especial? Yo no veo nada malo en él… si a la chica le gusta.

—La señorita Brooke es demasiado joven para saber lo que quiere. Su tutor tendría que intervenir. No debería permitir que una cosa así se haga de forma tan precipitada. Me maravilla que un hombre como usted, Cadwallader, un hombre con hijas y con un corazón como el suyo contemple ese asunto con indiferencia. Le pido que piense seriamente en ello.

—No estoy bromeando; hablo con la mayor seriedad posible —dijo el rector, con una irritante risita apenas audible—. Es usted tan poco razonable como Elinor. No hace más que pedirme que vaya y reprenda a Brooke; y yo le he recordado que sus deudos juzgaron de manera muy desfavorable su matrimonio conmigo.

—Pero fíjese en Casaubon —dijo sir James muy indignado—. Debe de tener por lo menos cincuenta años, y no creo que haya sido nunca mucho más que la sombra de un hombre. ¡Fíjese en sus piernas!

—¡Al diablo con ustedes, los jóvenes bien parecidos! Creen que en el mundo todo se tiene que hacer a su manera. No entienden a las mujeres. No les gustan ustedes ni la mitad de lo que ustedes se gustan a sí mismos. Elinor solía decir a sus hermanas que se había casado conmigo por mi fealdad… que era tan variada y divertida que había vencido por completo a su prudencia.

—¡Su caso es distinto! Era bien fácil que una mujer lo quisiera. Pero lo de ahora no es un problema de belleza. No me gusta Casaubon. —Aquella era la manera más decidida que tenía sir James de dar a entender su juicio adverso sobre la personalidad de alguien.

—¿Por qué? ¿Sabe usted algo contra él? —dijo el rector, abandonando los carretes y poniendo los pulgares en las sisas del chaleco con un gesto atento.

Sir James hizo una pausa. Normalmente no le resultaba fácil exponer sus razones: le parecía extraño que las personas no las conocieran sin necesidad de explicárselas, puesto que sus opiniones eran siempre razonables. Finalmente, dijo:

—Pero, vamos a ver, ¿acaso tiene corazón?

—Sí, claro que lo tiene. No uno de esos que se derriten, pero sí un núcleo bien firme, de eso puede estar usted seguro. Se porta muy bien con sus parientes pobres: ha establecido pensiones para varias de las mujeres y también está educando a un chico joven, en el que se gasta mucho dinero. Casaubon actúa de acuerdo con su sentido de la justicia. La hermana de su madre hizo una mala boda… Se casó con un polaco, creo, se perdió… En cualquier caso, fue repudiada por la familia. Si no hubiera sido por eso, Casaubon solo tendría la mitad del dinero que ahora posee. Creo que fue él a buscar a sus primos, para ver lo que podía hacer por ellos. No todo el mundo sonaría tan bien si se probara su metal. Usted, sí, Chettam; pero no todo el mundo.

—No sé —dijo sir James, enrojeciendo—. Yo no estoy tan seguro de mí mismo. —Hizo una breve pausa, y luego añadió—: Fue una buena acción por su parte. Pero quizá un hombre quiera hacer lo que está bien, y ser, sin embargo, una especie de código apergaminado. Quizá no haga feliz a una mujer. Y creo que cuando una muchacha es tan joven como la señorita Brooke, sus deudos tendrían que intervenir para evitar que hiciese una tontería. Usted se ríe, porque le parece que hablo por motivos personales. Pero le aseguro por mi honor que no es así. Mis sentimientos serían los mismos si yo fuera el hermano o el tío de la señorita Brooke.

—Bien, pero ¿qué haría usted?

—Diría que el matrimonio debe retrasarse hasta la mayoría de edad de la muchacha. Y puede estar seguro de que nunca se celebraría esa boda. Quisiera que lo viera usted como yo lo veo… Me gustaría que hablara con Brooke.

Sir James se puso en pie antes de terminar la frase, porque vio entrar a la señora Cadwallader procedente del estudio. Llevaba de la mano a su hija más pequeña, de unos cinco años. La niña echó a correr de inmediato hacia su papá, que se la puso cómodamente sobre las rodillas.

—He oído lo que decía. —La esposa del rector se dirigió a sir James—. Pero no espere que sus palabras tengan el menor efecto sobre Humphrey. Mientras los peces no dejen de picar, todo el mundo seguirá siendo lo que tiene que ser. ¡Dios nos asista, Casaubon es propietario de un río truchero y no le interesa nada la pesca! ¿Quién encontraría nunca a un hombre mejor?

—Bueno, hay algo de cierto en eso —dijo el rector, con su risa tranquila y casi silenciosa—. Es una excelente cualidad tener un río truchero.

—Pero, de verdad —dijo sir James, cuyo enojo seguía vivo—, ¿no cree usted que su marido podría conseguir algo hablando?

—Ya le conté el otro día cuál sería su reacción —respondió la señora Cadwallader, alzando las cejas—. Yo he hecho lo que he podido: me lavo las manos en ese matrimonio.

—En primer lugar —dijo el rector, adoptando un aire bastante grave—, sería absurdo esperar que yo

lograra convencer a Brooke y le hiciese actuar en consecuencia. Brooke es muy buena persona, pero carece de solidez; sería posible meterlo en cualquier molde, pero no conservaría la forma.

—Podría conservarla lo suficiente para aplazar el matrimonio —dijo sir James.

—Pero, mi querido Chettam, ¿por qué iba a ejercer yo mi influencia en contra de Casaubon, a menos que estuviera mucho más seguro de lo que estoy de que con ello beneficiaría a la señorita Brooke? No sé nada malo de Casaubon. No me interesan ni su Xisuthrus, ni su Fi-fo-fum[24] ni todo lo demás; pero también es cierto que a él le traen sin cuidado mis aparejos de pesca. En cuanto a la actitud que adoptó en relación con la cuestión católica, es cierto que no me lo esperaba; pero siempre se ha mostrado cortés conmigo, y no veo por qué tendría que estropearle el noviazgo. Por lo que se me alcanza, tal vez la señorita Brooke sea más feliz con él que con cualquier otro hombre.

—¡Humphrey! Haces que pierda la paciencia. Sabes que preferirías cualquier cosa a cenar a solas con Casaubon. No tenéis nada que deciros el uno al otro.

—¿Y eso qué tiene que ver con la señorita Brooke? No se casa con él para que yo me divierta.

—No tiene sangre en las venas —dijo sir James.

—No. Alguien puso una gota bajo una lente de aumento, y no había más que puntos, comas y paréntesis —dijo la señora Cadwallader.

—¿Por qué no publica su libro, en lugar de casarse? —dijo sir James, con una repugnancia que, en su opinión, quedaba justificada por los nobles sentimientos de cualquier caballero inglés.

—Sueña con notas a pie de página, que luego se le escapan y le dejan el cerebro agotado. Dicen que cuando era niño hizo un resumen de *Pulgarcito* y desde entonces no ha dejado de hacer resúmenes. ¡Uf! Y ese es el hombre que, según Humphrey, puede hacer feliz a una mujer.

—Bueno, a la señorita Brooke le gusta —dijo el rector—. No pretendo entender los gustos de todas las jóvenes.

—Pero… ¿y si se tratara de su hija de usted? —preguntó sir James.

—Eso ya sería diferente. Pero no es mi hija, y no me siento llamado a intervenir. Casaubon es tan respetable como la mayoría de nosotros. Se trata de un clérigo erudito, que da prestigio a la Iglesia. Un radical que pronunció un discurso en Middlemarch dijo que Casaubon era el rector que se encargaba de partir sabiamente los cabellos en cuatro, que Freke se ocupaba de la construcción y yo de la pesca con caña. Y, a fe mía, no veo que ninguno sea ni mejor ni peor que los otros. —El rector terminó riendo sin ruido. Siempre encontraba divertida cualquier burla dirigida contra él. Tenía una conciencia muy ancha y sin complicaciones, como todo el resto de su persona: solo hacía lo que podía sacar adelante sin dificultades.

Era evidente que el señor Cadwallader no iba a poner el menor obstáculo al matrimonio de la señorita Brooke; y sir James comprendió con tristeza que Dorothea disfrutaría de completa libertad para equivocarse. Un síntoma de su buena disposición fue que no flaqueó en absoluto en su propósito de llevar a buen término el proyecto de Dorothea para las viviendas de los colonos. No hay duda de que tal perseverancia era el mejor camino para conservar la propia dignidad; pero el orgullo solo nos ayuda a ser generosos, no nos hace serlo, como tampoco la vanidad nos dota de ingenio. La señorita Brooke no se engañaba ya sobre los motivos de sir James y apreciaba la rectitud de su perseverancia en los deberes de propietario, perseverancia a la que en un principio se había visto impulsado por su interés como pretendiente; y el placer que seguía encontrando en aquella tarea era lo bastante intenso para influir incluso en su felicidad actual. Quizá Dorothea dedicaba a las viviendas de sir James Chettam todo el interés que no necesitaba dedicar al señor Casaubon, o más bien a la sinfonía de sueños esperanzados, confianza admirativa y apasionada abnegación que aquel caballero había despertado en su alma. Aconteció, por tanto, que en las sucesivas visitas del buen baronet, mientras empezaba a tener pequeñas atenciones con Celia, sir James se descubrió hablando con Dorothea de manera cada vez más placentera. La señorita Brooke se comportaba con total naturalidad y sin manifestar irritación contra él, y el baronet descubría gradualmente el placer que existe en el sincero afecto y camaradería entre un hombre y una mujer sin pasiones que ocultar ni que confesar.

Capítulo IX

PRIMER CABALLERO: En antiguos oráculos se llamaba «sedienta de justicia»
a una tierra antigua: allí todos los esfuerzos
iban encaminados al orden y a un gobierno perfecto.
Dime, ¿dónde se encuentra ahora esa tierra?
SEGUNDO CABALLERO: ¡Qué pregunta! Donde siempre ha estado: en el alma de los seres humanos.

El comportamiento del señor Casaubon en las capitulaciones matrimoniales resultó sumamente satisfactorio para el señor Brooke, y los preliminares de la boda transcurrieron con toda suavidad, acortando las semanas de noviazgo. La prometida debe ver su futuro hogar y decidir qué cambios quiere que se hagan. Una mujer ordena y manda antes del matrimonio para después tener deseos de sumisión. Y, a decir verdad, los errores que los mortales de uno y otro sexo cometemos cuando hacemos nuestra voluntad podrían justificar cierto asombro ante el mucho aprecio en que la tenemos.

Una mañana de noviembre, gris pero sin lluvia, Dorothea se trasladó, acompañada de su tío y de Celia, a Lowick, donde el señor Casaubon ocupaba la casa solariega. Cerca, y visible desde algunas partes del jardín, se hallaba la iglesia, con la vieja rectoría frente a ella. Al comienzo de su carrera, el señor Casaubon era tan solo el clérigo beneficiado de Lowick, pero a la muerte de su hermano tomó posesión de la casa solariega. La mansión disponía de un pequeño parque, con algún que otro roble añoso de hermosa silueta, una avenida de tilos hacia la fachada del sudoeste y una zanja y un muro de retención entre el parque y el jardín ornamental; de este modo, desde las ventanas del salón la vista se extendía sin interrupción a lo largo de una pendiente cubierta de césped hasta que los tilos terminaban en una llanura de maíz y de pastizales que con frecuencia parecían disolverse formando un lago bajo el sol poniente. Aquel era el lado risueño de la casa, porque el sur y el este ofrecían un aspecto bastante melancólico incluso en las mañanas más luminosas. Los jardines tenían aquí menos espacio, los macizos de flores no daban la impresión de estar muy cuidados, y grandes grupos de árboles, sobre todo tejos sombríos, habían crecido mucho a menos de diez metros de las ventanas. El edificio, de piedra verdosa, era de estilo inglés antiguo, no feo, pero de ventanas pequeñas y aspecto melancólico: el tipo de casa que necesita niños, muchas flores, ventanas abiertas y vistas agradables para que parezca un hogar alegre. Al final del otoño, con algunas hojas amarillas cayendo lentamente entre los oscuros árboles de hoja perenne en una quietud sin luz de sol, la casa tenía también un aire de decadencia otoñal, y el señor Casaubon, al hacer su aparición, se hallaba desprovisto de la frescura juvenil que aquel entorno pudiera realzar.

«¡Qué lástima! —se dijo Celia—, estoy segura de que Freshitt Hall hubiese sido mucho más agradable que esto». Se acordó de la piedra caliza blanca, del pórtico con columnas y de la terraza llena de flores, y de sir James sonriendo por encima de ellas como un príncipe liberado de su encantamiento en un rosal, con un pañuelo que no era más que el resultado de la veloz metamorfosis de los pétalos más perfumados. ¡Sir James, que hablaba de manera tan agradable, con mucho sentido común, siempre sobre cosas corrientes y nunca sobre temas eruditos! Celia poseía esos juveniles gustos femeninos algo etéreos que hombres graves y curtidos prefieren a veces en una esposa; pero, por fortuna, las inclinaciones del señor Casaubon habían sido otras, porque con Celia no habría tenido nunca ni la más remota posibilidad de éxito.

Dorothea, en cambio, consideró la casa y los jardines como la culminación de todos sus deseos: las oscuras estanterías en la larga biblioteca, las alfombras y las cortinas de colores deslucidos por el tiempo, los curiosos mapas de otras épocas, las vistas a vuelo de pájaro en las paredes del corredor y los jarrones

antiguos no le resultaron opresivos en absoluto, y le parecieron más alegres que los yesos y los cuadros que su tío había traído a Tipton Grange de sus viajes hacía ya mucho tiempo, tal vez como parte de las ideas a las que tanto se aficionara en otra época. Para la pobre Dorothea aquellas severas desnudeces clásicas y figuras renacentistas de sonrisas afectadas al estilo de Correggio, testigos no deseados de su actitud puritana ante la vida, resultaban dolorosamente inexplicables: nadie le había enseñado nunca procedimiento alguno para integrarlas en su vida. En cambio, los propietarios de Lowick no habían sido al parecer viajeros, y los estudios del señor Casaubon sobre el pasado no requerían de semejantes auxiliares.

Dorothea recorrió la casa sintiendo agradables emociones. Todo le parecía sagrado: aquel era el hogar donde viviría como mujer casada, y contemplaba al señor Casaubon con ojos llenos de confianza cada vez que su prometido señalaba a su atención detalles concretos y le preguntaba si le gustaría introducir modificaciones. Agradecía que se acudiera a su buen gusto, pero no veía nada necesitado de cambio. Los esfuerzos del señor Casaubon para lograr una estricta cortesía y una ternura ceremoniosa le parecían libres de todo defecto. La señorita Brooke llenaba los huecos con perfecciones ocultas, interpretando a su futuro marido como interpretaba las obras de la Providencia y atribuyendo las aparentes disonancias a su propia sordera ante armonías más elevadas. Y son muchos los huecos que quedan en las semanas de noviazgo, huecos que una amorosa confianza llena con promesas de felicidad.

—Ahora, mi querida Dorothea, deseo que hagas el favor de señalar en qué habitación quisieras tener tu *boudoir* —dijo el señor Casaubon, poniendo de manifiesto que sus ideas sobre la naturaleza femenina eran lo bastante amplias para incluir aquel requisito.

—Eres muy amable al pensar en eso —dijo Dorothea—, pero te aseguro que prefiero que alguien decida por mí todas esas cuestiones. Seré mucho más feliz aceptándolo todo como está, tal como tú te has acostumbrado a tenerlo o con los cambios que tú mismo decidas introducir. Carezco de motivos para desear nada distinto.

—Pero, Dodo —dijo Celia—, ¿no te gustaría la habitación de arriba con el mirador?

El señor Casaubon guio hasta allí a sus invitados. El mirador daba a la avenida de tilos; los muebles eran todos de un color azul desvaído y, colgadas de la pared, había un grupo de miniaturas de damas y caballeros con el cabello empolvado. Un tapiz, situado sobre una puerta, también mostraba un mundo verde y azul habitado por un pálido ciervo. Las sillas y mesas eran de patas finas y aire frágil. Se trataba de una habitación en la que cabía imaginar que el fantasma de una dama muy austera volviese a veces para visitar el escenario de sus labores de bordado. Una estantería de color claro con volúmenes en dozavo de literatura refinada, encuadernados en piel, completaba el mobiliario.

—Sí —dijo el señor Brooke—, esta habitación quedaría muy bonita con algunas cortinas nuevas, sofás y cosas así. Ahora está un poco vacía.

—No, tío —dijo Dorothea con vehemencia—. No hables, por favor, de cambiar nada. ¡Hay tantos otros sitios en el mundo que necesitan cambios!… Yo quiero aceptarlo todo tal como está. Y a ti te gusta así, ¿no es cierto? —añadió después, mirando al señor Casaubon—. Quizá fue esta la habitación de tu madre cuando era joven.

—Así es —dijo él, con la lenta inclinación de cabeza que le era habitual.

—Esa es tu madre —dijo Dorothea, que se había vuelto para examinar el grupo de miniaturas—. Se parece a la más pequeña que me trajiste, aunque creo que este retrato es mejor. ¿Quién es la dama de al lado?

—Su hermana mayor. Eran solo dos hijas, como vosotras; los retratos de sus padres están colgados encima, como puedes ver.

—La hermana es bonita —dijo Celia, dejando traslucir una opinión menos favorable sobre la madre del señor Casaubon. Para la imaginación de Celia era una completa novedad que su futuro cuñado procediera de una familia cuyos miembros habían sido jóvenes a su debido tiempo… y en la que las damas usaban collares.

—Tiene un rostro peculiar —dijo Dorothea, mirándola más de cerca—. Esos ojos de color gris oscuro bastante juntos… la delicada nariz poco regular con algo semejante a una ondulación… y todos esos rizos empolvados que le cuelgan por detrás. Me resulta más peculiar que bien parecida. No existe siquiera un aire de familia entre ella y tu madre.

—No. Tampoco tuvieron la misma suerte.

—No me habías hablado de ella —dijo Dorothea.

—Mi tía hizo un matrimonio desgraciado. Yo no la traté nunca.

Dorothea sintió cierta curiosidad, pero comprendió que sería poco delicado en aquel momento pedir una información que el señor Casaubon no ofrecía de manera espontánea, y se volvió hacia la ventana para

admirar el paisaje. El sol acababa de atravesar las nubes con sus rayos y la avenida de tilos empezaba a arrojar sombras.

—¿No deberíamos pasear ahora un poco por el jardín? —preguntó.

—Y te gustará conocer la iglesia, ya verás —dijo el señor Brooke—. Es muy graciosa. Y el pueblo. Está todo muy junto. Lo encontrarás muy de tu gusto, Dorothea; porque las casas son como una hilera de viviendas para los pobres, con sus jardincitos, sus alhelíes, cosas así.

—Sí, por favor —dijo Dorothea mirando al señor Casaubon—, me gustaría ver todo eso. —Acerca de las casas de Lowick solo había conseguido de su prometido un «no están mal» por toda explicación.

Muy pronto se hallaron en un paseo con grava que discurría sobre todo entre zonas con hierba y grupos de árboles y que, según explicó el señor Casaubon, era el camino más directo para llegar a la iglesia. Ante la cancela que cerraba el patio hicieron una pausa mientras el señor Casaubon iba a la cercana rectoría en busca de la llave. Celia, que se había quedado un poco atrás, se acercó en seguida al ver alejarse al señor Casaubon, y dijo con la tranquila y pausada ecuanimidad que siempre parecía contradecir toda sospecha de una intención maliciosa:

—¿Sabes, Dorothea? He visto a una persona muy joven viniendo por uno de los paseos.

—¿Qué hay de sorprendente en eso, Celia?

—Puede que sea un jardinero joven… ¿por qué no? —intervino el señor Brooke—. Le dije a Casaubon que debía cambiar de jardinero.

—No; no era el jardinero —dijo Celia—, sino un caballero con un cuaderno de dibujo. Y rizos de color castaño claro. Solo lo he visto de espaldas. Pero era muy joven.

—El hijo del vicario, quizá —dijo el señor Brooke—. ¡Ah!, ahí viene otra vez Casaubon, y Tucker con él. Va a presentaros a Tucker. No lo conocéis todavía.

El señor Tucker era un hombre de mediana edad, perteneciente al «bajo clero», personas a las que no falta de ordinario un buen número de hijos. Pero después de ser presentado, la conversación no se orientó hacia su familia, por lo que todo el mundo olvidó la sorprendente aparición de la juventud, menos Celia, que interiormente se negó a aceptar cualquier posible relación de los rizos de color castaño claro y la esbelta figura del desconocido con el señor Tucker, que era viejo y tenía el mismo aspecto mohoso del señor Casaubon; sin duda un hombre excelente que iría al cielo (porque Celia no quería ser una persona sin principios), pero con un rictus muy desagradable en la boca. Celia pensó con cierto desánimo en el tiempo que, como dama de honor de la novia, tendría que pasar en Lowick, donde el vicario carecería probablemente de unos preciosos niños con los que ella pudiera pasarlo bien sin necesidad de echar mano a ningún principio.

El señor Tucker supuso una ayuda inestimable para su paseo; y quizá al señor Casaubon no le había faltado previsión en ese punto, porque el vicario supo contestar sin excepción a las preguntas de Dorothea sobre los habitantes del pueblo y sobre los demás fieles de la parroquia. Todo el mundo, le aseguró el señor Tucker, vivía bien en Lowick: ni uno solo de los habitantes de aquellas viviendas de renta muy baja carecía de un cerdo para engordar; y las huertecillas de la parte trasera estaban muy bien cuidadas. Los chicos vestían una pana excelente, las chicas salían a servir muy pulcramente o hacían trenzados de paja en casa: no había telares allí, ni disidentes[25]; y aunque el carácter de la población se inclinaba más al ahorro que a la espiritualidad, no había mucho vicio. Las gallinas moteadas eran tan abundantes que el señor Brooke observó:

—Veo que sus colonos dejan algo de cebada para que espiguen las mujeres. Aquí las personas humildes pueden echar una gallina a la olla, como el buen rey francés solía desear para todo su pueblo. Los franceses comen muchas aves… pero flacas, claro.

—Pues a mí me parece una ambición despreciable —dijo Dorothea, rebosante de indignación—. ¿Acaso los reyes son unos seres tan monstruosos que semejante deseo recibe la consideración de virtud regia?

—Y si lo que deseaba para ellos era una gallina flaca —dijo Celia—, no está nada bien. Pero quizá quería que tuviesen gallinas gordas.

—Sí, pero la palabra ha desaparecido del texto, o quizá fuera *subauditum*; es decir, presente en el pensamiento del rey, pero no expresada —dijo el señor Casaubon, sonriendo e inclinándose hacia Celia, que inmediatamente retrocedió un poco, porque no soportaba que su futuro cuñado le guiñase los ojos.

Dorothea guardó silencio durante el camino de vuelta a la casa. Sentía cierta desilusión, de la que se avergonzaba, porque no había nada que pudiera hacer en Lowick; y durante unos minutos su imaginación consideró la posibilidad, que hubiese preferido, de descubrir que su futuro hogar se hallaba en una parroquia con una mayor dosis de sufrimiento humano, para tener así deberes más activos. Luego, recurriendo al porvenir que de verdad se ofrecía ante sus ojos, trazó un cuadro de absoluta dedicación a los

proyectos de su futuro marido, y a los nuevos deberes que la esperaban. Quizá descubriera otros muchos al aumentar sus conocimientos en compañía del señor Casaubon.

El señor Tucker los dejó en seguida, porque alguna tarea eclesiástica le impedía almorzar en la casa solariega; y mientras volvían a entrar en el jardín por la cancela, el señor Casaubon dijo:

—Pareces un poco triste, Dorothea. Confío en que te haya agradado lo que has visto.

—Siento algo que es quizá absurdo e incluso censurable —respondió Dorothea con su franqueza habitual —. Casi desearía que la gente tuviese más necesidad de que se la ayude. Y es que conozco muy pocas maneras de hacer algo útil con mi vida. Por supuesto, cabe que mi idea de utilidad sea muy mezquina. Tengo que aprender nuevas maneras de ayudar a la gente.

—No cabe duda —dijo el señor Casaubon— de que cada posición en el mundo tiene sus deberes correspondientes. Confío en que los tuyos como señora de Lowick no dejarán insatisfecho ningún anhelo.

—Sí, también lo creo yo —dijo Dorothea con mucha gravedad—. No pienses que estoy triste.

—Me alegro. Y, si no estás cansada, volveremos a la casa por otro camino.

Dorothea no estaba cansada en absoluto, y dieron un pequeño rodeo en dirección a un hermoso tejo, el más importante motivo de orgullo hereditario en aquella parte de los jardines. Al acercarse advirtieron la presencia de una figura que resaltaba contra el fondo verde oscuro de la hoja perenne; era alguien sentado en un banco, que hacía un apunte del viejo árbol. El señor Brooke, que iba delante con Celia, volvió la cabeza y dijo:

—¿Quién es ese joven, Casaubon?

Estaban ya muy cerca cuando el interpelado respondió:

—Un pariente mío, primo segundo; el nieto, precisamente —añadió, mirando a Dorothea—, de mi tía Julia, la señora en cuyo retrato te fijaste.

El joven había dejado el cuaderno de dibujo, poniéndose en pie. Sus espesos rizos de color castaño claro, así como su aire juvenil, lo identificaron inmediatamente con la descripción hecha por Celia.

—Dorothea, permíteme presentarte a mi primo, el señor Ladislaw. Will, esta es la señorita Brooke.

El joven se hallaba ahora tan cerca que, al quitarse el sombrero, Dorothea pudo ver unos ojos grises bastante juntos, una delicada nariz un tanto irregular con una pequeña ondulación, unos cabellos peinados hacia atrás; pero también había una boca y una barbilla de aire más prominente y amenazador del que correspondía a los rasgos reflejados en la miniatura de su abuela. El joven Ladislaw no consideró necesario sonreír, como hubiera sido lógico, para mostrar su cortés satisfacción al ser presentado a su futura prima segunda y a sus parientes; su aspecto era más bien de enfurruñado descontento.

—Es usted un artista, por lo que veo —dijo el señor Brooke, apoderándose del cuaderno de dibujo y pasando las hojas sin mayor ceremonia.

—No, solo hago algunos apuntes. No hay nada ahí digno de verse —dijo el joven Ladislaw, poniéndose colorado, más quizá por la irritación que por la modestia.

—Vamos, vamos; esto no está nada mal, por ejemplo. Yo también dibujé un poco en cierta época, ¿sabe? Mire esto; es lo que yo llamo una cosa bien hecha; tiene lo que por entonces solíamos llamar brío. —El señor Brooke mostró a las dos muchachas un apunte coloreado de un suelo pedregoso con árboles y un estanque.

—No sé juzgar esas cosas —dijo Dorothea, no con frialdad, sino deseosa de disculparse al ver que se le pedía una opinión—. Acuérdate, tío, de que nunca veo la belleza de esos cuadros que, según tú, reciben tantos elogios. Son un lenguaje que no entiendo. Supongo que entre los cuadros y la naturaleza existe una relación que soy demasiado ignorante para advertir… de la misma manera que tú entiendes una frase griega que para mí no significa nada. —Dorothea miró al señor Casaubon, que inclinó la cabeza hacia ellas, mientras el señor Brooke decía, sonriendo despreocupadamente:

—¡Parece imposible lo diferentes que son las personas! Pero es que te enseñaron muy mal… porque esto es lo que más les va a las muchachas: hacer apuntes, las bellas artes y todo lo demás. Aunque sí te gusta hacer planos; lo que no entiendes es la *morbidezza* y otras cosas por el estilo. Vendrá usted a Tipton Grange, espero, y le enseñaré lo que yo hice en esta línea —continuó el señor Brooke, volviéndose hacia el joven, que se había olvidado de sus preocupaciones observando a Dorothea. Ladislaw había decidido de antemano que sería una muchacha desagradable, puesto que iba a casarse con Casaubon, y lo que dijo sobre su incapacidad para apreciar la pintura había confirmado esa opinión, aun creyendo en la sinceridad de sus palabras. De hecho las interpretó como un juicio disimulado, y sacó la conclusión de que su apunte le parecía detestable. Había demasiado ingenio en su disculpa: la señorita Brooke se estaba riendo tanto de su tío como de él. Pero ¡qué voz! Era como la voz de un alma que hubiese vivido en un arpa eolia en otro tiempo. Debía de ser una de las incongruencias de la naturaleza. No cabía el menor apasionamiento en una

muchacha que iba a casarse con Casaubon. Pero dejó de examinarla para agradecer la invitación del señor Brooke con una inclinación de cabeza.

—Repasaremos juntos mis grabados italianos —continuó aquel afable caballero—. Tengo muchísimos, pero llevo años sin mirarlos. Uno se apoltrona en esta zona del país, ya sabe. Usted no, Casaubon; usted persevera en sus estudios; pero mis mejores ideas se van quedando atrás, en desuso, ya me entiende. Ustedes, los jóvenes inteligentes, deben estar en guardia contra la indolencia. Yo he sido demasiado perezoso, ¿se da cuenta? De lo contrario hubiese podido llegar muy lejos.

—Esa advertencia es muy oportuna —dijo el señor Casaubon—; pero ahora entremos en la casa, no sea que las señoritas se hayan cansado de estar de pie.

Cuando le volvieron la espalda, el joven Ladislaw se sentó para continuar con su dibujo, y al hacerlo su rostro adquirió una expresión regocijada que fue aumentando mientras trabajaba, hasta que terminó por echar la cabeza hacia atrás y reír en voz alta. Lo que le divertía era, en parte, la acogida dispensada a su producción artística; también la idea de su solemne primo como novio de aquella muchacha; y, finalmente, la opinión del señor Brooke sobre hasta dónde podría haber llegado de no haber sido por la indolencia. El sentido del ridículo del señor Will Ladislaw lograba iluminar sus facciones de una forma muy agradable: era el puro deleite de la comicidad, sin mezcla alguna de desprecio ni de vanagloria.

—¿Qué piensa hacer su sobrino en el futuro, Casaubon? —preguntó el señor Brooke mientras seguían caminando.

—Mi primo, no mi sobrino.

—Sí, claro, primo. Me refiero a alguna carrera, ya sabe.

—La respuesta a esa pregunta es dolorosamente incierta. Al salir de Rugby no quiso ir a una universidad inglesa, adonde yo lo habría mandado con gusto, y eligió lo que debo considerar una anómala trayectoria de estudios en Heidelberg. Ahora quiere salir de nuevo al extranjero, sin ningún objeto definido, excepto el vago propósito de adquirir cultura, como preparación para algo que todavía ignora. Rehúsa elegir una profesión.

—Supongo que no tiene más medios que los que usted le proporciona.

—A él y a sus deudos les he dado siempre motivos para creer que, con moderación, les proporcionaría lo necesario para adquirir una educación superior y para que pudiesen iniciar con dignidad su vida profesional. Me veo por tanto en la obligación de dar cumplimiento a las expectativas suscitadas —dijo el señor Casaubon, explicando su conducta a la luz de la simple probidad: un rasgo de delicadeza que Dorothea advirtió con admiración.

—Está ansioso por viajar; quizá se convierta en un Bruce o en un Mungo Park[26] —dijo el señor Brooke —. Yo mismo pensé en hacerlo en otro tiempo.

—No, no se siente inclinado a la exploración ni al enriquecimiento de nuestra geognosia: eso constituiría una meta a la que yo podría, hasta cierto punto, conceder mi aprobación, aunque con las reservas que suscita una carrera que con frecuencia concluye en una muerte tan prematura como violenta. Pero mi primo está tan lejos de anhelar conocer con mayor precisión la superficie de la tierra, que asegura preferir que se conserve el misterio de las fuentes del Nilo y que algunas regiones desconocidas se preserven como cazaderos para la imaginación poética.

—Bien, no se puede negar que es una idea interesante, después de todo —dijo el señor Brooke, que poseía sin duda un espíritu imparcial.

—Me temo que sea tan solo parte de su general falta de exactitud y ausencia de interés por cualquier tipo de perfección, lo que habría que considerar como un mal augurio para él en cualquier profesión, civil o religiosa, incluso en el caso de que llegara a mostrarse tan sumiso a las normas habituales de conducta como para elegir una.

—Quizá tenga escrúpulos de conciencia basados en su propia ineptitud —dijo Dorothea, que se estaba esforzando por encontrar una explicación favorable—. Porque el derecho y la medicina deben de ser profesiones muy difíciles de ejercer, ¿no es cierto? La vida y la fortuna de las personas dependen de ellas.

—Sin duda; pero temo que la aversión de mi joven pariente a esas ocupaciones procede sobre todo de su antipatía al trabajo perseverante y a cualquier conocimiento puramente instrumental que carece de atractivo y no invita de inmediato a una actitud de autocomplacencia. Le he repetido muchas veces lo que Aristóteles expresó con admirable concisión: que para la coronación de cualquier trabajo considerado como un fin deben haberse ejercitado con anterioridad muchas energías o habilidades de categoría secundaria, que es necesario adquirir y que exigen paciencia. Le he puesto el ejemplo de mis propios volúmenes manuscritos, que representan el esfuerzo de años, esfuerzo preparatorio de un trabajo aún sin terminar. Pero ha sido en vano. Ante razonamientos semejantes, su reacción es llamarse Pegaso y calificar de «brida»

cualquier forma de trabajo obligatorio.

Celia se echó a reír. Le sorprendió descubrir que el señor Casaubon pudiera decir algo francamente divertido.

—Bueno, quizá se convierta en un Byron, un Chatterton, o un Churchill[27]… o algo así… Nunca se sabe —dijo el señor Brooke—. ¿Le dejará usted ir a Italia o a cualquier otro sitio que quiera visitar?

—Sí; me he comprometido a proporcionarle los medios suficientes para otro año; no pide más. Permitiré que se someta a la prueba de la libertad.

—Eso es muy amable por tu parte —dijo Dorothea, mirando satisfecha al señor Casaubon—. Es una actitud muy noble. Después de todo, cabe que algunos seres humanos posean una vocación que no perciben con claridad, ¿no es cierto? Quizá parecen débiles y perezosos porque están creciendo. Debemos ser muy pacientes unos con otros, creo yo.

—Supongo que estar prometida es lo que te ha hecho considerar la paciencia una cosa buena —dijo Celia, tan pronto como Dorothea y ella estuvieron a solas, quitándose las prendas de abrigo.

—Quieres decir que soy muy impaciente, ¿no es eso, Celia?

—Sí; siempre que las personas no hacen o dicen exactamente lo que a ti te gusta. —Celia había perdido el miedo a «decir cosas» a Dorothea desde que su hermana se había prometido: la inteligencia le parecía más digna de compasión que nunca.

Capítulo x

Habría atrapado un tremendo resfriado si no hubiera tenido más ropa que la piel de un oso todavía por cazar.[28]

FULLER

El joven Ladislaw no llegó a hacer una visita al señor Brooke en respuesta a su invitación, y tan solo seis días más tarde el señor Casaubon mencionó que su primo se había puesto en camino rumbo al Continente, dando la impresión de descartar cualquier posible pregunta mediante aquella fría vaguedad. De hecho, Will se había negado a dar como destino un lugar más concreto que la extensión total de Europa. El genio, mantenía, ha de mostrarse por fuerza intolerante ante cualquier traba: por una parte, debe disfrutar del mayor espacio posible para la espontaneidad; por otra, esperar tranquilo los mensajes que el universo le envíe para llevar a cabo su tarea específica, limitándose a adoptar una actitud receptiva ante cualquier oportunidad sublime. Las actitudes de receptividad son diversas, y Will había probado muchas. No le gustaba con exceso el vino, pero en varias ocasiones había bebido demasiado, simplemente como experimento de esa forma de éxtasis: había ayunado hasta desmayarse, cenando después langosta; se había puesto enfermo con dosis de opio. Nada extraordinariamente original había resultado de aquellas iniciativas; y los efectos del opio le habían convencido de que existían grandes diferencias entre su constitución y la de De Quincey. Las demás circunstancias que servirían para desarrollar su genio no se habían presentado todavía; el universo aún no le hacía señas. En cierta época, incluso la fortuna de Julio César solo había sido un presentimiento. Sabemos que todo desarrollo es una sucesión de disfraces, así como de la perfección de formas que se esconde en indefensos embriones. De hecho, el mundo está lleno de esperanzadoras analogías y de huevos tan hermosos como inciertos llamados posibilidades. Will veía con suficiente claridad los penosos ejemplos de las largas incubaciones que no llegaban a producir su pollito, y tan solo la gratitud le impedía reírse de Casaubon, cuya asidua y lenta dedicación, sus hileras de cuadernos y su diminuto candil de teorías eruditas con que explorar las desordenadas ruinas del mundo, parecían reforzar una moral totalmente favorable a la generosa confianza del joven en las intenciones del universo para su persona. Will Ladislaw consideraba esta confianza señal del genio; y, desde luego, no puede decirse que sea signo de lo contrario; el genio no consiste ni en el engreimiento ni en la humildad, sino en la capacidad para hacer algo en particular y no cualquier cosa en general. Dejemos al joven primo del señor Casaubon ponerse en camino hacia el Continente sin pronunciarnos sobre su futuro. Entre las abundantes posibilidades de error, la profecía es la más gratuita de todas.

Pero en el momento presente esta cautela frente a un juicio precipitado me interesa más con respecto al señor Casaubon que a su joven primo. Si para Dorothea el clérigo erudito había sido la ocasión que sirve para prender fuego al noble material inflamable de sus ilusiones juveniles, ¿se deduce de ahí que al señor Casaubon lo juzgaran correctamente aquellos otros personajes menos apasionados que han expresado hasta ahora su opinión acerca de él? Yo rechazo cualquier conclusión definitiva, cualquier prejuicio que sea consecuencia del desprecio de la señora Cadwallader por la pretendida grandeza de alma de un clérigo local, o de la pobre opinión de sir James Chettam sobre las piernas de su rival, o de la incapacidad del señor Brooke para hacer salir a la luz las ideas de su interlocutor, o de las críticas de Celia sobre la apariencia externa de un estudioso de mediana edad. No estoy segura de que el hombre más grande de su época —si es que alguna vez ha existido cumbre tan solitaria— pudiera escapar a los desfavorables reflejos de sí mismo en diferentes espejos de reducidas dimensiones; e incluso Milton, al contemplar su imagen en una cuchara,

tendría que conformarse con el ángulo facial de un palurdo. Además, si el señor Casaubon, al hablar por sí mismo, hace gala de una retórica bastante fría, no se puede deducir de ahí que esté desprovisto de sentimientos delicados o de capacidad para realizar una tarea meritoria. ¿No es verdad que cierto físico inmortal, intérprete de jeroglíficos, escribía versos detestables[29]? ¿Es que la teoría del sistema solar ha avanzado gracias a modales educados y tacto en las conversaciones? Prescindamos de las apreciaciones superficiales sobre un hombre para preguntarnos, con el más vivo interés, cuál es el dictamen de su propia conciencia sobre sus realizaciones o su capacidad: con qué obstáculos se tropieza para llevar adelante su labor diaria; qué oscurecimiento de esperanzas o qué profunda fijación en el autoengaño ha ido originando en su interior el paso de los años; y con qué ánimos lucha contra las presiones del universo, que un día serán demasiado pesadas para él, y forzarán a su corazón a hacer la pausa definitiva. No hay duda de que su destino es importante a sus propios ojos; y la principal razón de que nos parezca que solicita un espacio demasiado amplio en nuestra consideración tiene que ser la falta de sitio para él, ya que lo remitimos a la Divina Providencia con absoluta confianza; más aún, se considera incluso sublime que nuestro prójimo espere de ella grandes cosas, por muy poco que haya recibido de nosotros. También el señor Casaubon era el centro de su propio mundo; si se hallaba expuesto a pensar que otras personas habían sido providencialmente creadas para él, y especialmente a considerarlas a la luz de su idoneidad para ayudar al autor de la *Llave de todas las mitologías*, tal rasgo no nos es del todo ajeno y, como otras injustificadas esperanzas de los mortales, reclama un poco de compasión por nuestra parte.

Ciertamente el asunto de su matrimonio con la señorita Brooke le afectaba mucho más que a ninguna de las personas que han mostrado hasta ahora su desacuerdo con él, y en la presente situación su éxito me parece más digno de lástima que la desilusión del amable sir James. Porque a decir verdad, a medida que se aproximaba el día fijado para la boda, el señor Casaubon no se sentía más animado; ni tampoco la contemplación del futuro jardín matrimonial cuya senda, de acuerdo con todos los testimonios, debía estar bordeada de flores, le resultaba siempre más placentera que las habituales bóvedas bajo las que caminaba candil en mano. No se confesó a sí mismo, y mucho menos podría habérselo revelado a otra persona, la sorpresa de descubrir que, a pesar de haber conquistado a una encantadora joven de noble corazón, no por ello había conquistado el placer espiritual, cosa que él también consideraba objeto que, si se buscaba, se podría encontrar. Es cierto que conocía todos los pasajes clásicos que sugieren lo contrario; pero al final descubrimos que conocer pasajes clásicos es una forma de movimiento, lo que explica por qué dejan luego tan poca fuerza para su aplicación personal.

El pobre señor Casaubon había imaginado que su larga soltería dedicada al estudio había almacenado para él un capital de placeres a interés compuesto, y que los generosos cheques firmados por su afecto se convertirían de inmediato en moneda contante y sonante; porque a todos nosotros, personas serias o frívolas, las ideas se nos enredan en metáforas, y actuamos inevitablemente fundándonos en ellas. Y ahora corría el peligro de entristecerse por estar convencido de que las circunstancias de su vida eran especialmente alegres; no había nada exterior —dado que cambiaba la habitual monotonía de sus jornadas en la biblioteca de Lowick por las visitas a Tipton Grange— que pudiera justificar la frialdad que se apoderaba de él en el momento en que su júbilo debería ser más intenso. Era aquella una experiencia fatigosa en la que se hallaba tan condenado a la soledad como cuando a veces le amenazaba la desesperación mientras trabajaba con ahínco en la ciénaga de su potencial autoría sin ver por ello más próxima la meta. Y su soledad tenía la agravante de rehuir toda manifestación de simpatía. Estaba obligado a desear que Dorothea lo creyera poseedor de toda la felicidad que el mundo esperaba de su victorioso pretendiente; y, por lo que respecta a su futuro libro, Casaubon se apoyaba en la juvenil confianza y veneración de Dorothea, y le gustaba despertar su interés, todavía intacto, al escucharlo, como medio para darse ánimos: al hablar con ella, Casaubon presentaba toda su obra y sus intenciones con la confianza del pedagogo, y se libraba entonces del frío público ideal que poblaba sus laboriosas horas de nula creatividad con la vaporosa presión de sombras infernales.

Porque para Dorothea, después de la ridícula historia del mundo, adaptada para jovencitas, que había constituido la parte fundamental de su educación, las palabras del señor Casaubon acerca de su gran libro estaban llenas de nuevas perspectivas; y ese sentimiento de obtener revelaciones, la sorpresa de poder ver desde más cerca a estoicos y alejandrinos, de verlos como personas con ideas no totalmente diferentes de las suyas, mantenía momentáneamente en suspenso su habitual anhelo de una teoría totalizadora que pudiera situar su propia vida y doctrina en íntima conexión con aquel pasado asombroso, dando así a las más remotas fuentes de conocimiento alguna influencia sobre sus acciones. Las enseñanzas más completas vendrían con el tiempo; el señor Casaubon se lo explicaría todo. Dorothea esperaba con interés aquella iniciación a las ideas, como esperaba con interés el matrimonio, combinando sus vagas concepciones acerca

de ambas cosas. Sería una gran equivocación suponer que a Dorothea le hubiese interesado participar en el saber del señor Casaubon como simple habilidad o como un mérito más; porque si bien la opinión pública en la zona de Freshitt y Tipton la había calificado de inteligente, semejante epíteto no hubiese servido para describirla en círculos cuyo vocabulario —más preciso— implica que la inteligencia es una simple aptitud para conocer y hacer, independiente de la personalidad. Todo su deseo de aprender quedaba dentro de la gran corriente de motivaciones, ligadas a la compasión y a la comprensión, por las que sus ideas y sus impulsos se veían habitualmente arrastrados. Dorothea no quería engalanarse con conocimientos, no deseaba poseerlos como algo separado de los nervios y de la sangre que alimentaban sus acciones; y si hubiese escrito un libro lo habría hecho como santa Teresa, por obediencia a una autoridad que la obligase en conciencia. Pero anhelaba algo que pudiera llenar su vida con una actividad ardiente y racional al mismo tiempo; y puesto que ya había pasado la época de las visiones y de los directores espirituales, y puesto que la oración acrecentaba los anhelos pero no la instrucción, ¿qué otra lámpara quedaba, excepto el conocimiento? Sin duda alguna, los sabios conservaban el único aceite posible; y ¿quién más sabio que el señor Casaubon?

Así, en aquellas breves semanas, las gozosas y agradecidas expectativas de Dorothea continuaron incólumes, y aunque su prometido fuera en ocasiones consciente de monotonía, nunca pudo atribuirlo a una disminución del afectuoso interés de la señorita Brooke.

La estación era lo bastante cálida para estimular el proyecto de alargar el viaje de bodas hasta Roma; y el señor Casaubon estaba deseoso de hacerlo así, porque quería examinar algunos manuscritos custodiados en el Vaticano.

—Lamento mucho que tu hermana no venga con nosotros —dijo una mañana, algún tiempo después de confirmarse que Celia se resistía a acompañarlos, y que Dorothea no deseaba su presencia—. Pasarás muchas horas sola, porque me veré obligado a usar al máximo el tiempo durante nuestra estancia en Roma, y me sentiría más libre si tuvieras una persona que te acompañara.

Las palabras «me sentiría más libre» irritaron a Dorothea. Por primera vez en sus conversaciones con el señor Casaubon el enojo hizo que se le encendiera el rostro.

—Tienes que haberme entendido muy mal —dijo—, si crees que no sabré dar todo su valor a tu tiempo, si piensas que no renunciaré con gusto a cualquier cosa para que hagas de él el mejor uso posible.

—Eso es muy amable por tu parte, mi querida Dorothea —dijo el señor Casaubon, sin advertir en absoluto que su prometida se sentía herida—, pero si fueses con alguien os pondría a las dos al cuidado de un cicerone, y lograríamos así dos objetivos al mismo tiempo.

—Te ruego que no vuelvas a mencionarlo —dijo Dorothea con bastante altivez. Pero acto seguido temió haberse equivocado y, volviéndose hacia él, puso su mano sobre la de su prometido, añadiendo con diferente tono de voz—: Haz el favor de no preocuparte por mí. Tendré muchas cosas en que pensar cuando esté sola. Y Tantripp me proporcionará suficiente compañía cuidándose de mí. No quisiera llevar a Celia: se sentiría muy desgraciada.

Era la hora de vestirse. Aquella noche ofrecían una cena a un grupo de invitados, último de los festejos preliminares a la boda, y Dorothea se alegró de tener un motivo para ausentarse de inmediato al sonar la campana, como si necesitara más tiempo que de ordinario para prepararse. Se avergonzaba de haberse irritado por un motivo que ni siquiera ella misma era capaz de definir; porque, si bien no tenía intención de ocultar la verdad, su respuesta no había reflejado la auténtica herida interior. Las palabras del señor Casaubon, aunque muy razonables, le habían producido de manera instantánea la vaga sensación de que su prometido se distanciaba de ella.

«Sin duda me encuentro en un estado de debilidad mental peculiarmente egoísta —se dijo—. Si tengo un marido que se halla tan por encima de mí, ¿cómo no darme cuenta de que me necesita mucho menos de lo que yo lo necesito a él?».

Al convencerse de que el señor Casaubon estaba totalmente en lo cierto, Dorothea recobró la ecuanimidad y ofrecía ya una imagen agradable de serena dignidad cuando se presentó en el salón con su vestido gris plateado y el cabello castaño oscuro sencillamente peinado con raya en el centro y apretadamente recogido por detrás, en consonancia con la total ausencia, en sus modales y en su gesto, de todo lo que pudiera calificarse de afectación. A veces, cuando Dorothea estaba con otras personas, parecía haber en ella un aire de reposo tan completo como si fuese un retrato de santa Bárbara contemplando desde su torre el aire transparente; pero aquellos intervalos de quietud hacían aún más notable la energía de sus palabras y su emoción cuando algún estímulo exterior despertaba su interés.

Como es natural, la señorita Brooke fue el blanco de muchos comentarios durante aquella velada, por la abundancia de invitados y la heterogeneidad de los varones, muy superior a la registrada en ninguna de las

fiestas celebradas en Tipton Grange desde que las sobrinas del señor Brooke residían con él, de manera que las conversaciones se realizaban entre dúos y tríos más o menos discordantes. Allí estaba el recién elegido alcalde de Middlemarch, fabricante de profesión; su filantrópico cuñado, el banquero Bulstrode, que poseía tal ascendiente sobre la ciudad que unos lo llamaban metodista y otros hipócrita, según los recursos de su vocabulario; y también había varios representantes de las profesiones liberales. De hecho, la señora Cadwallader dijo que Brooke estaba empezando a mimar a los habitantes de Middlemarch, y que ella prefería la cena con los arrendatarios con motivo del pago del diezmo, cuando brindaban a la salud de la esposa del rector sin darse aires, y no se avergonzaban de los muebles de sus abuelos. Porque en aquella parte del país, antes de que la reforma electoral hubiese aportado su notable contribución al desarrollo de la conciencia política, había una clara distinción jerárquica y otra mucho más imprecisa de partidos; de manera que las invitaciones heterogéneas del señor Brooke parecían proceder de la laxitud general nacida de sus desordenados viajes y de su costumbre de aceptar demasiadas cosas en nombre de las ideas.

Al salir la señorita Brooke del comedor surgieron ya oportunidades para algunos apartes.

—¡Una magnífica mujer, la señorita Brooke! ¡Una gran mujer, fuera de lo corriente, a fe mía! —dijo el señor Standish, el viejo abogado, que llevaba tanto tiempo tratando a los terratenientes que se había convertido él mismo en propietario, y usaba aquella exclamación, lanzada con voz grave, a modo de soporte heráldico, destinado a marcar el habla de un hombre de buena posición social.

El señor Bulstrode, el banquero, parecía ser el destinatario de aquellas palabras, pero como era persona a quien molestaba la vulgaridad, se limitó a hacer una inclinación de cabeza. La observación fue recogida por el señor Chichely, soltero de mediana edad y célebre en el ambiente de las carreras de galgos, que tenía cierto aspecto de huevo de Pascua, cabellos muy escasos cuidadosamente arreglados y un porte que implicaba el convencimiento de una distinguida apariencia.

—Sí, pero no es mi estilo de mujer: a mí me gusta una señora que se esfuerce un poco más por complacernos. Debe haber un poco de filigrana en una mujer… algo de coquetería. A un hombre le gusta que se le desafíe un poco. La mujer cuanto más le hace frente a uno, mejor.

—Hay algo de verdad en eso —dijo el señor Standish, dispuesto a mostrarse afable—. Y, a fe mía, eso es de ordinario lo que tiene éxito con ellas. Supongo que responde a algún sabio propósito: la Providencia las hizo así, ¿no le parece, Bulstrode?

—Yo me inclino a atribuir la coquetería a otra fuente —dijo el señor Bulstrode—. La veo más bien emparentada con el demonio.

—Ah, claro que sí, siempre conviene que haya un pequeño demonio en cada mujer —dijo el señor Chichely, cuyos estudios del sexo débil parecían haber tenido un nocivo efecto sobre su teología—. Y a mí me gustan rubias, con cierta forma de andar, y cuello de cisne. Entre nosotros, la hija del alcalde es más de mi gusto que la señorita Brooke o la señorita Celia. Si yo fuera un hombre que buscara esposa, elegiría a la señorita Vincy antes que a las otras dos.

—Bien, decídase entonces, decídase —dijo el señor Standish, con tono festivo—; últimamente vemos triunfar a los hombres de mediana edad.

El señor Chichely movió la cabeza con intención: no entraba en sus cálculos exponerse a ser aceptado por la mujer de sus sueños.

La señorita que ostentaba el honor de ser el ideal femenino del señor Chichely no se hallaba presente, por supuesto; porque el señor Brooke, siempre dispuesto a no ir demasiado lejos, consideraba poco oportuno que sus sobrinas se codearan con la hija de un fabricante de Middlemarch, si no era con motivo de un acto público. Entre las invitadas a la cena no había nadie a quien lady Chettam o la señora Cadwallader pudieran poner objeciones; porque la señora Renfrew, la viuda del coronel, no solo era irreprochable desde el punto de vista de su educación, sino también interesante por su enfermedad, que tenía perplejos a los médicos y parecía claramente un caso donde la plenitud de los conocimientos profesionales necesitaba quizá del suplemento del curanderismo. Lady Chettam, que atribuía su notable salud a la ingestión de un aperitivo con sabor amargo de fabricación casera, sin descuidar por ello la continua atención médica, escuchó con gran interés el relato que la señora Renfrew le hizo de sus síntomas y se admiró de la sorprendente inutilidad, en su caso, de todos los reconstituyentes.

—¿Adónde irá la fuerza de esas medicinas, querida? —dijo la dulce pero majestuosa viuda, volviéndose hacia la señora Cadwallader con gesto reflexivo cuando otras personas distrajeron la atención de la señora Renfrew.

—A reforzar la enfermedad —dijo la esposa del rector, demasiado aristocrática para no ser también aficionada a la medicina—. Todo depende de la constitución: algunas personas producen grasa, otras sangre y otras bilis… esa es mi opinión; y tomen lo que tomen, los resultados son siempre los mismos.

—Entonces la señora Renfrew debe tomar medicinas que reduzcan… que reduzcan la enfermedad, si está usted en lo cierto. Y creo que es muy razonable lo que dice.

—Claro que es razonable. Tome usted dos clases de patatas, criadas en la misma tierra. Una de ellas crece más y tiene más agua…

—¡Ah! Como la pobre señora Renfrew… Eso es lo que yo creo. ¡Hidropesía! Todavía no ha empezado la hinchazón… Es interior. Yo diría que debe tomar medicinas que sequen, ¿no le parece?… O un baño de aire seco y caliente. Se pueden intentar muchas cosas que tiendan a producir sequedad.

—Quizá debiera utilizar los folletos de cierta persona —dijo la señora Cadwallader en voz baja, viendo entrar a los caballeros—. No es sequedad lo que le falta.

—¿Quién, querida? —dijo lady Chettam, una mujer encantadora, pero no tan rápida como para hacer innecesario el placer de la explicación.

—El novio… Casaubon. No hay duda de que se ha ido secando más deprisa desde su compromiso: la llama de la pasión, imagino.

—Me parece que está lejos de tener una buena constitución —dijo lady Chettam, con voz aún más baja —. Y además sus estudios… Muy áridos, como usted dice.

—Realmente, al lado de sir James parece una calavera recubierta de piel con motivo de esta fiesta. Fíjese en lo que le digo: dentro de un año esa chica lo odiará. Ahora lo mira como si fuera un oráculo y a la larga pasará al otro extremo. ¡Todo frivolidad!

—¡Qué cosa tan horrible! Me temo que sea muy testaruda. Pero, dígame… usted lo sabe todo de él… ¿sucede algo grave? ¿Cuál es la verdad?

—¿La verdad? Casaubon es tan malo como una medicina mal recetada; tiene un gusto muy desagradable y seguro que sienta mal.

—No puede haber nada peor —dijo lady Chettam, haciéndose una idea tan clara de aquella medicina que pareció aprender algo muy preciso sobre los inconvenientes del señor Casaubon—. James, sin embargo, no quiere oír nada en contra de la señorita Brooke. Todavía dice que es un espejo donde pueden mirarse todas las mujeres.

—Es una mentira generosa por su parte. Tenga usted la seguridad de que le gusta más la pequeña Celia, y que ella lo aprecia. Espero que también a usted le guste mi pequeña Celia.

—Ciertamente; se interesa por los geranios más que su hermana y parece más dócil, aunque no tiene tan buena figura. Pero estábamos hablando de medicinas: infórmeme acerca de ese joven médico nuevo, el señor Lydgate. Me dicen que es muy inteligente; desde luego lo parece… Tiene una frente magnífica.

—Es un caballero. Le he oído hablar con Humphrey. Habla bien.

—Sí. El señor Brooke dice que es uno de los Lydgate de Northumberland, personas muy bien relacionadas. No resulta nada corriente en un profesional de su clase. Por mi parte, prefiero que un médico esté más cerca del nivel de los criados; con frecuencia son los más inteligentes. Le aseguro que siempre encontré acertados los diagnósticos del pobre Hicks; no recuerdo que se equivocara nunca. Era vulgar y con aspecto de carnicero, pero conocía perfectamente mis necesidades. Para mí fue una gran pérdida que se marchara tan de repente. ¡Vaya! ¡Qué conversación tan animada parece estar sosteniendo la señorita Brooke con ese señor Lydgate!

—Está hablando con él de viviendas y de hospitales —dijo la señora Cadwallader, cuyos oídos y poder de interpretación eran muy rápidos—. Creo que es una especie de filántropo, de manera que el señor Brooke lo tomará con toda seguridad bajo su protección.

—James —dijo lady Chettam cuando su hijo se acercó—, trae al señor Lydgate y preséntamelo. Quiero hacerle una prueba.

La afable señora se declaró encantada de conocer a Lydgate, ya que había oído hablar de sus éxitos con un nuevo tratamiento para la fiebre.

El señor Lydgate tenía la virtud médica de mantener un aire perfectamente serio a pesar de las tonterías que se le dijeran, y sus ojos oscuros, que miraban con fijeza, le daban gran autoridad como oyente. No tenía el menor parecido con el llorado Hicks, sobre todo debido a cierto refinado descuido en su apariencia y manera de hablar. A lady Chettam, sin embargo, le inspiró gran confianza. Confirmó a aquella excelente señora sus ideas sobre lo peculiar de su constitución al admitir que todas las constituciones podían llamarse peculiares y sin negar que la suya pudiera ser más peculiar que otras. El señor Lydgate no era partidario de un tratamiento demasiado debilitante, que incluyera sangrías imprudentes ni, tampoco, por otra arte, del abuso del oporto y de la quinina. Dijo «eso creo» con tal aire de deferencia, unido a la clara percepción de un total acuerdo entre los dos, que lady Chettam se formó la más favorable de las opiniones sobre su talento.

—Estoy muy satisfecha con su *protégé* —le dijo al señor Brooke antes de marcharse.

—¿Mi *protégé*? ¿Sí? ¿Quién es? —dijo el señor Brooke.

—Ese joven, Lydgate, el médico nuevo. Me parece que entiende su profesión admirablemente.

—¡Ah, Lydgate! No es mi *protégé*, ¿sabe? Solo conozco a un tío suyo que me escribió hablándome de él. Pero creo que puede ser de primera categoría… Ha estudiado en París, y allí conoció a Broussais[30]; tiene ideas, ya sabe, quiere elevar la profesión. Lydgate tiene muchas ideas, muy nuevas, sobre ventilación y dieta y cosas así —continuó el señor Brooke, después de que se hubo despedido de lady Chettam y regresó junto a un grupo de habitantes de Middlemarch, deseoso de mostrarse hospitalario.

—¡Caramba! ¿Cree usted que eso es conveniente…? ¿Cambiar los viejos tratamientos que han hecho de los ingleses lo que son? —dijo el señor Standish.

—La ciencia médica está en decadencia entre nosotros —dijo el señor Bulstrode, que hablaba en tono muy bajo y tenía un aire más bien enfermizo—. Yo, por mi parte, celebro la llegada del señor Lydgate. Y espero encontrar buenas razones para confiarle la dirección del nuevo hospital.

—Todo eso está muy bien —replicó el señor Standish, que no simpatizaba con Bulstrode—; si a usted le gusta que haga experimentos con los pacientes de su hospital y mate a unas cuantas personas por caridad, no tengo ninguna objeción. Pero no pienso dar dinero de mi bolsillo para que se hagan experimentos conmigo. Me gustan los tratamientos que ya se han puesto a prueba.

—Bueno, Standish, cualquier dosis que se tome es un experimento… Un experimento, ¿se da cuenta? —dijo el señor Brooke, inclinando la cabeza en dirección al abogado.

—¡Si se refiere usted a eso…! —dijo el señor Standish, manifestando ante aquel sofisma, ajeno a la profesión legal, todo el desprecio que un abogado está en condiciones de permitirse con un cliente importante.

—Yo me contentaría con cualquier tratamiento que me curase sin reducirme a un esqueleto, como le sucedió al pobre Grainger —dijo el alcalde, señor Vincy, un hombre rubicundo, cuya tez hubiese servido para un estudio sobre colores cálidos, en violento contraste con las tonalidades franciscanas del señor Bulstrode—. Es muy peligroso quedarse sin almohadillado frente a las saetas de la enfermedad, como alguien dijo… y yo considero que se trata de una frase muy afortunada.

El señor Lydgate, por supuesto, no se encontraba presente. Había abandonado muy pronto la fiesta y le habría parecido insoportable, de no haber sido por algunas novedades como la posibilidad de conocer a la señorita Brooke, cuya juvenil lozanía, su próximo matrimonio con aquel estudioso marchito y su interés por las cuestiones sociales, le daban el peculiar sabor de una combinación muy poco frecuente.

«Es una excelente criatura… esa muchacha tan hermosa… pero quizá demasiado seria —pensó—. Es incómodo hablar con mujeres así. Siempre quieren saber las razones de las cosas, pero son demasiado ignorantes para entender el valor de una argumentación y de ordinario terminan recurriendo a su sentido moral para solucionar las cosas de acuerdo con sus propios gustos».

A todas luces, la señorita Brooke no era el mejor estilo de mujer para el señor Lydgate, como tampoco lo era para el señor Chichely. Considerada, desde luego, en relación con este último caballero, más maduro en sus juicios, Dorothea era un desastre total, sin otra finalidad que debilitar su confianza en las últimas causas, incluyendo la necesidad de que jóvenes hermosas se adapten a las exigencias de solteros rubicundos. Pero Lydgate poseía un grado inferior de madurez, y quizá tuviera en el futuro experiencias que modificaran su opinión sobre cuáles son las mejores cualidades de una mujer.

En cualquier caso, ninguno de aquellos dos caballeros volvió a ver a la señorita Brooke mientras utilizaba todavía su nombre de soltera. No mucho después de aquella fiesta, Dorothea se convirtió en la señora Casaubon y emprendió viaje a Roma.

Capítulo XI

> Sino las acciones y el lenguaje que los hombres de verdad utilizan,
> y personas como las que elige la comedia,
> cuando quiere mostrar una imagen de la época,
> y divertirse con las locuras humanas, no con sus delitos.
>
> BEN JONSON

Lydgate, de hecho, se sabía ya fascinado por una mujer bien distinta de la señorita Brooke: no se imaginaba, desde luego, que hubiera perdido el equilibrio y que estuviese enamorado, pero había dicho de ella: «Es la gracia personificada; no cabe otra persona más hermosa y llena de virtudes. Es lo que una mujer debe ser: tiene que producir el efecto de una música exquisita». Lydgate miraba a las mujeres feas como a otras tantas desagradables realidades de la vida, a las que era necesario enfrentarse con filosofía e investigar mediante la ciencia. Pero Rosamond Vincy parecía poseer el verdadero encanto melódico; y cuando un hombre encuentra a la mujer que elegiría si tuviese intención de casarse pronto, la prolongación de su soltería dependerá más de la voluntad de ella que de la de él. Lydgate creía que no debía casarse hasta pasados varios años: necesitaba abrirse una senda personal lejos del ancho camino trazado para los demás. Llevaba tratando a la señorita Vincy casi el mismo tiempo que el señor Casaubon había necesitado para prometerse y casarse; pero aquel sabio caballero poseía fortuna, había reunido sus voluminosas notas y conseguido esa reputación que precede a la obra acabada que es, con frecuencia, la parte más importante de la fama de un hombre. Casaubon tomó esposa, como hemos visto, para adornar el cuadrante que aún le quedaba hasta completar el curso de su vida y para que fuese una pequeña luna que apenas causara la menor perturbación. Pero Lydgate era joven, pobre, ambicioso. Tenía medio siglo por delante en lugar de a sus espaldas, y había acudido a Middlemarch deseoso de lograr muchas cosas que no estaban directamente relacionadas con hacer fortuna, ni siquiera con unos buenos ingresos. Para un hombre en esas circunstancias, tomar esposa es algo más que una cuestión de adorno, por mucho que se pueda valorar ese aspecto, y pese a que Lydgate estaba dispuesto a darle el primer lugar entre las funciones que competen a una esposa. Según su gusto y sin otra guía que una sola conversación, Lydgate decidió que aquel era el punto en el que la señorita Brooke resultaba poco satisfactoria, no obstante su innegable belleza. Dorothea no miraba las cosas desde el ángulo femenino adecuado. La compañía de semejantes mujeres era tan relajante como ir a dar clases a alumnos de enseñanza básica después del trabajo, en lugar de recostarse en un paraíso con dulces risas a manera de trinos de pájaros y con unos ojos azules a modo de cielo.

Nada, desde luego, podía parecerle a Lydgate menos importante en el momento presente que la actitud mental de la señorita Brooke, ni a Dorothea menos pertinente que las cualidades femeninas de la mujer capaz de atraer al joven médico. Pero cualquiera que observe con atención la subrepticia convergencia de los destinos humanos, advertirá una lenta preparación de efectos de una vida sobre otra, preparación que, como ironía calculada, hace mella sobre la indiferencia o la fría mirada con que contemplamos al vecino que aún no nos ha sido presentado. El destino, sonriendo sarcástico, permanece a la espera con nuestras *dramatis personae* en la palma de la mano.

La vieja sociedad provinciana tuvo su participación en este sutil movimiento: no solo con sus llamativas caídas, no solo con sus brillantes profesionales jóvenes que terminaron viviendo en un entresuelo con una mujer desaliñada y seis hijos, sino también con esas vicisitudes menos señaladas que cambian constantemente las fronteras de las relaciones sociales y generan nuevas formas de percibir la

interdependencia. Algunos se deslizaron un poco pendiente abajo, otros consiguieron instalarse más arriba; hubo personas que modificaron su forma de hablar, que ganaron dinero, y caballeros exigentes que se presentaron a elecciones; algunos quedaron atrapados en corrientes políticas, otros en corrientes eclesiásticas y debido a ello se encontraron, quizá, agrupados de manera sorprendente, mientras unos pocos personajes o familias que se mantenían con pétrea firmeza en medio de todas estas fluctuaciones, presentaban lentamente nuevas facetas a pesar de su solidez, con modificaciones producidas por el cambio propio y el de los espectadores. Los municipios y las parroquias rurales establecieron poco a poco nuevas conexiones a medida que el viejo calcetín dio paso a las cajas de ahorros y que el culto a las monedas de oro terminó por extinguirse, mientras terratenientes y baronets, e incluso los grandes aristócratas que habían vivido en otro tiempo inmaculadamente al margen de las cuestiones cívicas, cosechaban las consecuencias negativas de unas relaciones más estrechas. También llegaron colonos desde condados muy distantes, algunos con una alarmante destreza manual hasta entonces desconocida, otros con la desagradable ventaja de su astucia. De hecho, en la vieja Inglaterra se produjeron casi los mismos movimientos y las mismas mezclas que encontramos en Herodoto, escritor todavía más viejo, quien, al explicar el curso de la historia, también juzgó conveniente utilizar el destino de una mujer como punto de partida[31]; si bien Io, en calidad de doncella seducida al parecer por atractivos bienes de consumo, era el reverso de la señorita Brooke, y desde ese punto de vista quizá presente mayor parecido con Rosamond Vincy, que tenía un gusto excelente en el vestir y estaba además en posesión de una figura de ninfa y de unos cabellos rubios que permitían el máximo abanico de posibilidades a la hora de decidir sobre la abundancia y el color de las telas. Pero estas cosas constituían solo parte de su encanto. Todo el mundo reconocía que era la flor del centro docente de la señora Lemon, la academia para señoritas más importante del condado, donde la enseñanza incluía todo lo que se exige a una perfecta dama, incluidos los más mínimos detalles, hasta la forma de subir y de apearse de un vehículo. La misma señora Lemon siempre ponía a la señorita Vincy como ejemplo: ninguna de sus alumnas, decía, la superaba ni en conocimientos ni en corrección en la forma de hablar; en cuanto a la música, sus cualidades como intérprete eran sin duda excepcionales. No podemos cambiar los elogios que otras personas utilizan para hablar de nosotros y, probablemente, si la señora Lemon se hubiera propuesto describir a Julieta o a Imogen[32], esas heroínas no nos habrían parecido nada poéticas, pero la primera aparición de Rosamond en carne y hueso habría bastado para que en el espíritu de la mayor parte de sus jueces se disipara cualquier prejuicio despertado por los elogios de la señora Lemon.

Lydgate no pasó mucho tiempo en Middlemarch sin disfrutar de tan agradable primera aparición y tampoco tardó mucho en conocer a toda la familia Vincy; porque, si bien el señor Peacock, cuya clientela heredó, no había sido su médico de cabecera (a la señora Vincy no le gustaba su manera de combatir la fiebre), el joven médico tenía muchos pacientes entre sus amigos y conocidos. Porque ¿qué persona de cierta importancia en Middlemarch no estaba relacionada o por lo menos conocía a los Vincy? Eran antiguos fabricantes y habían vivido lujosamente por espacio de tres generaciones, produciéndose durante ese tiempo, como es lógico, muchos enlaces matrimoniales con vecinos de elevada posición social. La hermana del señor Vincy había hecho una boda muy ventajosa al casarse con el señor Bulstrode, a quien, sin embargo, como forastero y de origen casi desconocido, se consideraba afortunado por haberse unido con una familia de Middlemarch; el señor Vincy, por otra parte, había descendido un poco al contraer matrimonio con la hija de un posadero. Pero también por ese lado había un positivo consuelo monetario, dado que la hermana de la señora Vincy había sido la segunda esposa —muerta sin hijos años antes— del viejo y rico señor Featherstone, por lo que cabía esperar que sus sobrinos y sobrinas recibieran una prueba material del afecto del viudo. Y sucedió también que el señor Bulstrode y el señor Featherstone, dos de los pacientes más importantes de Peacock, dispensaron, por diferentes razones, un recibimiento especialmente cordial a su sucesor, que cosechó muy pronto algunos partidarios, aunque también encontrara algunas personas dispuestas a criticarlo. El señor Wrench, médico de la familia Vincy, tuvo en seguida motivos para dudar de la discreción profesional de Lydgate y no había comentario acerca de él que no fuese repetido en casa de los Vincy, donde abundaban los visitantes. El señor Vincy se inclinaba más a la sociabilidad universal que a tomar partido, pero no tenía ninguna necesidad de apresurarse a entablar relaciones con un recién llegado. Rosamond deseaba en silencio que su padre invitara al señor Lydgate. Estaba cansada de los rostros y de las figuras a que se había acostumbrado desde siempre: los diferentes perfiles poco regulares, la manera de andar y los modos de expresarse característicos de los jóvenes de Middlemarch que conocía desde su infancia. Rosamond se había educado con muchachas de más elevada posición social, cuyos hermanos, estaba segura, podrían haberle interesado más que aquellos inevitables compañeros de Middlemarch. Pero nunca se le hubiese ocurrido mencionar sus deseos al señor Vincy, y él, por su parte, no

tenía ninguna prisa. Un concejal a punto de ser alcalde debe, con el tiempo, tener más invitados a sus cenas, pero de momento su mesa bien surtida se veía suficientemente frecuentada.

Sobre esa mesa seguían con frecuencia los restos del desayuno familiar mucho tiempo después de que el señor Vincy se hubiese ido al almacén con su segundo hijo y de que la señorita Morgan iniciara las lecciones matutinas para las hijas más pequeñas en la habitación utilizada como aula. La mesa esperaba al holgazán de la familia, quien consideraba cualquier tipo de molestia (para otros) menos desagradable que salir de la cama cuando lo llamaban. Tal fue el caso en una mañana del mismo mes de octubre en el que hace muy poco vimos al señor Casaubon visitar Tipton Grange; y aunque en la habitación hacía más calor del necesario debido al fuego de la chimenea, calor que había enviado al perro de aguas, jadeante, al rincón más apartado del cuarto, Rosamond, por algún motivo, siguió bordando más tiempo del normal, removiéndose de cuando en cuando en el asiento y colocándose la labor sobre las rodillas para contemplarla con aire aburrido. La madre, por su parte, después de una excursión a la cocina, permaneció sentada al otro lado de la mesita de trabajo con una expresión mucho más plácida hasta que, al advertir que el reloj estaba a punto de dar la media, alzó la vista del zurcido que tenía ocupadas sus manos regordetas y tocó la campanilla.

—Llame otra vez a la puerta del señorito Fred, Pritchard, y dígale que ya son las diez y media.

Aquellas palabras fueron pronunciadas sin el menor cambio en el radiante buen humor que reflejaba el rostro de la señora Vincy, al que cuarenta y cinco años de vida no habían logrado dotar de la menor arruga; luego, echando hacia atrás las cintas color rosa de su cofia, descansó la labor sobre el regazo mientras contemplaba con admiración a su hija.

—Mamá —dijo Rosamond—, cuando baje Fred no le dejes desayunar arenques. No soporto su olor por toda la casa a esta hora de la mañana.

—¡Qué dura eres con tus hermanos, hija mía! Es el único defecto que te encuentro. Tienes el mejor carácter del mundo, pero te enfadas demasiado con tus hermanos.

—Enfadarme no, mamá; nunca me habrás oído hablarles con malos modos.

—Bueno, pero les niegas cosas.

—Los hermanos son muy desagradables.

—Pero los muchachos siempre serán muchachos. Alégrate de que tengan buen corazón. Una mujer debe aprender a soportar esas pequeñeces. También tú te casarás algún día.

—No con alguien que sea como Fred.

—No desprecies a tu hermano, hija mía. Hay pocos jóvenes a quienes se puedan hacer menos reproches, aunque Fred no haya terminado sus estudios… Y desde luego ignoro el motivo, porque a mí me parece muy inteligente. Sabes muy bien que en la universidad no desmerecía frente a los hijos de las mejores familias. Con lo exigente que eres, me pregunto por qué no estás contenta de tener por hermano a un muchacho tan caballeroso. Y a Bob siempre le pones inconvenientes porque no es Fred.

—No, mamá; tan solo porque es Bob.

—Bueno, no vas a encontrar ningún joven de Middlemarch que no tenga defectos.

—Pero… —Aquí el rostro de Rosamond se iluminó con una sonrisa que puso de manifiesto, repentinamente, dos hoyuelos. Ella, por su parte, no tenía buena opinión de los hoyuelos y sonreía poco cuando se hallaba en público—. Pero yo no me voy a casar con ningún joven de Middlemarch.

—Eso parece, porque es como si ya hubieras dicho que no a lo mejorcito; y si existe un partido más conveniente, no hay otra chica que se lo merezca más que tú.

—Perdóname, mamá, pero me gustaría que no dijeras «lo mejorcito».

—¿Por qué? ¿Acaso no es así?

—Es una expresión vulgar.

—Supongo que sí, querida; nunca he hablado demasiado bien. ¿Qué debería decir?

—Los mejores.

—Vaya, eso parece igual de corriente y vulgar. Si hubiese tenido tiempo de pensar, habría dicho «jóvenes de educación superior». Pero tú, que eres una chica muy instruida, lo sabrás mejor.

—¿Qué es lo que Rosy debe saber, madre? —dijo Fred, que había entrado sin que lo vieran mientras las señoras estaban inclinadas sobre su labor; luego, dirigiéndose hacia el fuego, se colocó de espaldas a las llamas, calentándose las suelas de las pantuflas.

—Si es correcto decir «jóvenes de educación superior» —dijo la señora Vincy tocando la campanilla.

—Bueno, ¡ahora hay tantos tés y azúcares superiores! «Superior» se está convirtiendo en jerga de tenderos.

—¿Es que empiezan a desagradarte las jergas? —dijo Rosamond con apacible seriedad.

—Solo las incorrectas. Toda elección de palabras es jerga. Caracteriza a un tipo de personas.

—Existe el inglés correcto: eso no es jerga.

—Siento tener que contradecirte: inglés correcto es la jerga de los pedantes que escriben historias y ensayos. Y la jerga más complicada es la de los poetas.

—Eres capaz de decir cualquier cosa para salirte con la tuya, Fred.

—Bueno, dime si es jerga o poesía llamar a un buey trenzador de patas.

—Por supuesto puedes llamarlo poesía si así lo deseas.

—Ah, mi querida Rosy, no distingues el lenguaje de Homero de una jerga. Voy a inventar un nuevo juego; escribiré trozos de jerga y de poesía en papeletas y te las daré para que las separes.

—¡Dios mío, qué divertido es oír hablar a la gente joven! —dijo la señora Vincy con satisfecha admiración.

—¿No hay nada más para desayunar, Pritchard? —preguntó Fred a la criada que le traía el café y las tostadas con mantequilla, mientras se paseaba alrededor de la mesa examinando el jamón, la carne en conserva y otros fiambres con mudo desagrado, pero evitando cortésmente manifestarlo de modo ostensible.

—¿Querría usted unos huevos?

—¿Huevos? ¡No! Caliénteme una chuleta.

—Verdaderamente, Fred —dijo Rosamond cuando la criada salió del comedor—, si exiges cosas calientes para el desayuno, me gustaría que bajases antes. Sales con el alba cuando vas de caza; no entiendo por qué te resulta tan difícil levantarte pronto los demás días.

—Te falta comprensión, Rosy. Me levanto pronto para ir de caza porque me gusta.

—¿Qué pensarías de mí si bajara dos horas después que todo el mundo y pidiese que me calentaran una chuleta?

—Pensaría que eras una jovencita muy disoluta —dijo Fred, comiéndose una tostada con exquisita compostura.

—No veo por qué los hermanos tienen que ser más desagradables que las hermanas.

—No soy desagradable; eres tú la que me encuentra desagradable. Es un adjetivo que describe tus sentimientos, no mis acciones.

—Creo que describe el olor a chuleta recalentada.

—En absoluto. Describe una sensación de tu nariz asociada con ciertas ideas remilgadas que son las clásicas del internado de la señora Lemon. Mira a mi madre; no la verás poner objeciones a nada excepto a lo que ella misma hace. Esa es mi idea de una mujer agradable.

—Que Dios os bendiga a los dos, hijos míos, pero no os peleéis —dijo la señora Vincy, con maternal amabilidad—. Vamos, Fred, cuéntanos todo lo que sepas del nuevo doctor. ¿Está tu tío contento con él?

—Creo que bastante. Le hace preguntas de todo tipo y luego tuerce la cara mientras oye las respuestas como si le estuvieran estrujando los dedos de los pies. Es su manera de comportarse. Vaya, aquí llega mi chuleta.

—Pero ¿cómo es que te quedaste hasta tan tarde, querido? Solo dijiste que ibas a casa de tu tío.

—Cené en casa de Plymdale. Jugamos al *whist*. Lydgate también estaba allí.

—Y ¿qué te ha parecido? Supongo que todo un caballero. Dicen que es de excelente familia… y sus parientes gente de muy buena posición.

—Sí —dijo Fred—. Había un Lydgate en Cambridge que gastaba muchísimo dinero. He sabido que nuestro hombre es primo segundo suyo. Pero los hombres ricos pueden tener pobres diablos por primos segundos.

—Nunca es lo mismo, sin embargo, ser de buena familia —dijo Rosamond, con un tono decidido que demostraba su preocupación por la jerarquía social. Rosamond estaba convencida de que podría haber sido más feliz si no hubiera sido la hija de un fabricante de Middlemarch. Le desagradaba cualquier cosa que le recordase que su abuelo materno había sido posadero. Y a decir verdad, quien lo supiera podía pensar que la señora Vincy recordaba a una patrona alegre y bien parecida, acostumbrada a los más caprichosos deseos de sus clientes.

—Me pareció extraño que se llamase Tertius —dijo la señora de rostro alegre—, aunque, por supuesto, es uno de esos nombres que se repiten en las familias. Pero dinos exactamente qué clase de persona es.

—Buena estatura, moreno, inteligente (habla bien), algo pedante, creo.

—Nunca sé lo que quieres decir con esa palabra —dijo Rosamond.

—Alguien que quiere demostrar que tiene opiniones.

—Pero los médicos tienen que tener opiniones —dijo la señora Vincy—. ¿Para qué sirven si no?

—Sí, madre, las opiniones por las que se les paga. Pero un pedante es un sujeto que siempre te está

regalando su opinión.

—Supongo que Mary Garth admira al señor Lydgate —dijo Rosamond, no sin un poquito de mala intención.

—Realmente no lo sé —dijo Fred, con aire bastante melancólico, mientras se levantaba de la mesa; luego, cogiendo una novela que había traído consigo, se dejó caer en un sillón—. Si estás celosa de ella, ve a Stone Court con más frecuencia y eclípsala.

—Me gustaría que no fueras tan vulgar, Fred. Si has terminado, haz el favor de tocar la campanilla.

—Pero es cierto lo que dice tu hermano, Rosamond —empezó la señora Vincy cuando la criada hubo recogido la mesa—. Es una pena que no tengas paciencia para ir más a ver a tu tío, con lo orgulloso que está de ti, y queriendo como quería que vivieras con él. Quién sabe lo que hubiera hecho por ti y por Fred. Dios es testigo de que me gusta tenerte en casa, pero estoy dispuesta a separarme de mis hijos por su propio bien. Y ahora parece razonable que tu tío Featherstone haga algo por Mary Garth.

—Mary Garth soporta Stone Court porque le gusta más que ser institutriz —dijo Rosamond, doblando su labor—. Prefiero que el tío no me deje nada si tengo que ganármelo aguantándole la tos y soportando a esos parientes suyos tan desagradables.

—Ya no puede durar mucho en este mundo; no quisiera precipitar su fin, pero con el asma y ese otro mal interno, esperemos que encuentre algo mejor en el otro. Yo no guardo rencor a Mary Garth, pero hay que pensar en que se haga justicia. La primera mujer del señor Featherstone no aportó dinero al matrimonio, como hizo mi hermana. Sus sobrinas y sobrinos no tienen tantos derechos como los de mi hermana. Y he de decir que Mary Garth me parece una chica poco atractiva… Le iría muy bien trabajar de institutriz.

—No todo el mundo estaría de acuerdo contigo en eso, madre —dijo Fred, que parecía capaz de leer y de escuchar al mismo tiempo.

—Bueno —respondió la señora Vincy, maniobrando hábilmente—, si alguien le dejara algún dinero… Porque un hombre se casa con los parientes de su mujer y ¡los Garth son tan pobres y viven tan modestamente! Pero te dejo con tus estudios, hijo mío; tengo que salir a hacer algunas compras.

—Los estudios de Fred no son muy profundos —dijo Rosamond, levantándose con su madre—; solo está leyendo una novela.

—Bueno, bueno; pero a la larga se pondrá con su latín y todo lo demás —dijo la señora Vincy, en tono conciliador, acariciando la cabeza de su hijo—. Hay un fuego encendido ex profeso en el salón de fumar. Es deseo de tu padre, ya sabes, y yo siempre le digo que te portarás bien y que volverás a la universidad para graduarte.

Fred se llevó a los labios la mano de su madre, pero no dijo nada.

—Supongo que hoy no vas a dar un paseo a caballo —dijo Rosamond, retrasándose un poco después de que se marchara la señora Vincy.

—No; ¿por qué?

—Papá dice que ya puedo montar el zaino.

—Sal conmigo mañana, si quieres. Pero recuerda que voy a Stone Court, no lo olvides.

—Tengo tantas ganas de montar que me da lo mismo adónde vayamos. —Rosamond quería realmente ir a Stone Court más que a ningún otro sitio.

—Oye, Rosy —dijo Fred, cuando su hermana se disponía a salir de la habitación—, si vas a practicar piano, déjame que te acompañe para que toquemos juntos unas cuantas melodías.

—Por favor, no me pidas eso hoy.

—¿Por qué hoy no?

—En serio, Fred, quisiera que dejaras de tocar la flauta. Un hombre tiene un aire muy ridículo tocando la flauta. Y además desafinas muchísimo.

—La próxima vez que alguien te corteje, señorita Rosamond, le diré cuán complaciente eres.

—¿Por qué esperas que te complazca oyéndote tocar la flauta, cuando lo que quiero es que me des gusto tú no tocándola?

—¿Y por qué esperas que te lleve mañana a montar a caballo?

La pregunta de su hermano produjo un cambio de actitud en Rosamond, muy interesada en aquel paseo.

De manera que Fred se vio recompensado con casi una hora de práctica, y pudo tocar algunas de sus melodías favoritas, incluidas en el *Maestro de la flauta*; una interpretación un tanto jadeante, en la que el joven Vincy puso mucha ambición y un inquebrantable optimismo.

Capítulo XII

Tenía cosas más importantes que hacer
de lo que Gerveis se imaginaba.

CHAUCER

El paseo a caballo hasta Stone Court, que Fred y Rosamond emprendieron a la mañana siguiente, se hacía recorriendo un bonito paisaje de tierras llanas, prados y pastizales en su mayor parte, con setos vivos a los que aún se permitía crecer sin cortapisas y extender sus frutos de coral para alimento de los pájaros. Pequeños detalles daban a cada campo una fisonomía particular, valiosa para quienes los habían contemplado desde la infancia: el estanque en una esquina donde la hierba estaba húmeda y donde los árboles se inclinaban, susurrantes; el gran roble que daba sombra a una calva en mitad del pasto; el terraplén muy alto donde crecían los fresnos; la repentina inclinación del viejo yacimiento de marga, que hacía de fondo rojo para la bardana; el amontonamiento de techos y almiares de la heredad, sin sitio reconocible por donde entrar; el portón gris y las vallas que se recortaban contra la espesura del bosque vecino; y el cobertizo abandonado, con su viejo, viejísimo bálago lleno de colinas musgosas y de valles con maravillosas modulaciones de luz y de sombra, semejantes a otras que, más adelante en la vida, impulsan a viajar muy lejos por el deseo de verlas, pero que, pese a ser más grandes, nunca resultan más hermosas. Tal es el repertorio de alegrías que proporciona el paisaje a las almas criadas en tierras llanas: las cosas entre las que dieron sus primeros pasos o que aprendieron quizá de memoria yendo de pie entre las rodillas de su padre mientras él conducía sin prisa.

Pero el camino, e incluso el atajo, eran excelentes; y es que Lowick, como ya hemos visto, no era un pueblo de calles embarradas y colonos pobres; porque fue en Lowick donde Fred y Rosamond entraron después de recorrer algo más de tres kilómetros. Al cabo de otro kilómetro y medio llegarían a Stone Court y desde la mitad de aquella distancia la casa ya era visible, con aire de haberse detenido en su crecimiento hacia mansión de piedra por un inesperado florecimiento de edificios agrícolas en su lado izquierdo, que le impidieron convertirse en algo más que la sólida vivienda de un caballero dedicado a la agricultura. Y el grupo de almiares de maíz terminados en pináculo, que compensaban la hermosa hilera de nogales de la derecha, no la convertía desde lejos en un objeto menos agradable de ver.

Muy pronto fue posible distinguir algo que podría ser una calesa en la avenida circular delante de la puerta principal.

—Vaya —dijo Rosamond—, espero que no esté aquí ninguno de los horribles parientes del tío.

—Pues sí que están. Esa es la calesa de la señora Waule… la última que queda de color amarillo, diría yo. Cuando veo a la señora Waule en ella, comprendo que se haya utilizado el amarillo para el luto. Esa calesa me resulta más fúnebre que un catafalco. Aunque también es cierto que la señora Waule siempre lleva crespones negros. ¿Cómo lo hace, Rosy? No es posible que continuamente se le esté muriendo algún deudo.

—Lo ignoro por completo. Y además no es nada evangélica —dijo Rosamond reflexivamente, como si aquella perspectiva religiosa bastara para explicar satisfactoriamente los crespones perpetuos—. Ni pobre —añadió después de una breve pausa.

—¡Desde luego que no! Esos Waule y Featherstone son ricos como judíos; quiero decir para personas como ellos, que no gastan un céntimo. Y, sin embargo, revolotean alrededor del tío como buitres y tienen

miedo de que a su rama de la familia se les escape lo más mínimo. Pero no creo que él les tenga ningún cariño.

Aquella señora Waule, que estaba lejos de ser admirable a ojos de parientes tan remotos, había dicho aquella misma mañana (no con aire desafiante, sino en voz baja y en tono apagado y neutral, como si se la oyera a través de algodón en rama) que no deseaba «disfrutar de su buena opinión». Estaba sentada, como ella misma hizo notar, ante el hogar de la chimenea de su hermano y había sido Jane Featherstone durante veinticinco años antes de convertirse en Jane Waule, lo que la autorizaba a hablar cuando personas que no tenían tal derecho se tomaban libertades con el nombre de su hermano.

—¿Se puede saber qué quieres decir? —dijo el señor Featherstone, empuñando el bastón que tenía entre las rodillas y colocándose mejor la peluca, mientras lanzaba a la señora Waule una mirada penetrante, que pareció tener sobre él el mismo efecto que una corriente de aire frío, porque inmediatamente empezó a toser.

La señora Waule tuvo que retrasar su respuesta hasta que su hermano se recuperó. Mary Garth le administró mientras tanto un poco de jarabe y el señor Featherstone empezó a frotar el puño dorado de su bastón, contemplando el fuego con gesto de amargura. Era un fuego alegre, pero eso no cambiaba el tono amoratado, como de frío, del rostro de la señora Waule, tan neutral como su voz y dotado de unas simples aberturas a manera de ojos y de unos labios que apenas se movían al hablar.

—Los médicos no son capaces de acabar con esa tos, Peter. Es igual que la que yo tengo, porque soy tu hermana hasta en la constitución y en todo lo demás. Pero, como estaba diciendo, es una lástima que la familia de la señora Vincy no sea capaz de comportarse mejor.

—¡Quia! No has dicho nada parecido, sino que alguien se tomaba libertades con mi nombre.

—He mencionado únicamente cosas que pueden probarse, si es cierto lo que todo el mundo dice. Mi hermano Solomon me ha contado que en Middlemarch solo se habla de lo inconstante que es el joven Vincy, y de cómo, desde su vuelta a casa, no hace más que apostar al billar.

—¡Tonterías! Una partida de billar es un juego de caballeros y el joven Vincy no es un patán. Si tu hijo John se dedicara a jugar al billar sí que haría el ridículo.

—Tu sobrino John nunca se ha aficionado al billar ni a ningún otro juego y está muy lejos de perder cientos de libras que, si lo que todo el mundo dice es cierto, no van a salir del bolsillo de su padre. Porque aseguran que lleva años perdiendo dinero en su negocio, aunque nadie lo pensaría, viéndolo ir de caza y con la casa siempre llena de invitados. Y he oído decir que el señor Bulstrode condena sobre todo a la señora Vincy por su frivolidad y por haber mimado tanto a sus hijos.

—¿Y a mí qué me importa Bulstrode? No es mi banquero.

—Sí, pero la señora Bulstrode es la hermana del señor Vincy y dicen que el señor Vincy comercia sobre todo con el dinero del banco; y tú mismo puedes ver, hermano, lo impropio que resulta para una mujer de más de cuarenta años llevar siempre cintas de color rosa y tener esa forma tan peculiar de reírse de cualquier cosa. Pero mimar a los hijos es una cosa y encontrar el dinero para pagar sus deudas, otra. Y se dice públicamente que el joven Vincy ha conseguido dinero a cuenta de sus esperanzas. No voy a decir qué esperanzas. La señorita Garth me está oyendo y tiene mi permiso para contar lo que he dicho. Ya sé que los jóvenes se reúnen unos con otros.

—No, gracias, señora Waule —dijo Mary Garth—. Me desagrada demasiado enterarme de escándalos para desear comentarlos.

El señor Featherstone frotó el puño de su bastón y rio brevemente de manera entrecortada, con la misma sinceridad con que un experto jugador de *whist* ríe entre dientes cuando le sirven malas cartas. Sin dejar de mirar al fuego, dijo:

—¿Y quién se atreve a afirmar que Fred Vincy no tiene esperanzas para el futuro? Un joven tan excelente y tan animoso es lógico que las tenga.

Se produjo una breve pausa antes de que la señora Waule replicara y, cuando lo hizo, aunque su rostro siguiera seco, su voz parecía estar ligeramente humedecida por las lágrimas.

—Tanto si las tiene como si no, a mí y a mi hermano Solomon nos resulta penoso, naturalmente, oír que alguien se toma libertades con tu nombre, sobre todo cuando padeces una enfermedad y en cualquier momento te podría suceder una desgracia, y personas que no son más Featherstone que el payaso de la feria dan por sentado en público que tu propiedad pasará a sus manos. ¡Y yo tu hermana, y Solomon tu hermano! Y si tiene que ser de esa manera, ¿para qué se ha molestado el Todopoderoso en crear familias? —Al llegar a este punto empezaron a fluir lágrimas de los ojos de la señora Waule, pero con moderación.

—¡Vamos, habla de una vez, Jane! —exclamó el señor Featherstone, mirándola—. Quieres decir que Fred Vincy ha hecho que alguien le preste dinero a cuenta de lo que dice saber sobre mi testamento, ¿no es

así?

—Yo nunca he dicho eso, hermano. —La voz de la señora Waule se había vuelto a secar y a adquirir firmeza—. Me lo contó mi hermano Solomon anoche, cuando vino a verme, a la vuelta del mercado, para aconsejarme sobre el trigo del año pasado, por ser yo viuda, y mi hijo John solo de veintitrés años, aunque es más responsable que nadie. Y él lo sabía por personas de innegable autoridad, y no una, sino muchas.

—¡Tonterías! No creo una sola palabra. No es más que una historia inventada. Acércate a la ventana, muchacha; me parece oír un caballo. Mira a ver si es el médico.

—Yo no lo he inventado, hermano, ni tampoco Solomon, que, se diga lo que se diga (y no niego que tenga sus rarezas), ha hecho testamento y dividido sus propiedades a partes iguales entre los parientes con los que se lleva bien; aunque, por mi parte, creo que hay veces en que se debiera tener más consideración con unos que con otros. Pero Solomon no hace ningún secreto de sus intenciones.

—¡Tanto peor para él! —dijo el señor Featherstone con cierta dificultad, sufriendo un fuerte ataque de tos que exigió que Mary Garth permaneciera a su lado, por lo que no pudo averiguar qué caballos eran los que en aquel momento se detenían sobre la grava delante de la puerta principal.

Antes de que se calmara la tos del señor Featherstone entró Rosamond, recogiéndose el traje de montar con mucho donaire. En seguida hizo una ceremoniosa reverencia a la señora Waule, quien respondió con gran tiesura: «¿Cómo está usted, señorita?»; luego Rosamond sonrió e hizo una inclinación de cabeza mirando a Mary y, finalmente, se quedó inmóvil esperando a que cesara la tos y su tío pudiera saludarla.

—Me alegro de verte —dijo por fin el señor Featherstone—. Tienes muy buen color. ¿Dónde está Fred?

—Ocupándose de los caballos. Vendrá en seguida.

—Siéntate, siéntate. Señora Waule, será mejor que te vayas.

Incluso los vecinos que llamaban viejo zorro a Peter Featherstone nunca le habían acusado de mostrarse innecesariamente cortés, y su hermana estaba muy acostumbrada a la peculiar ausencia de ceremonia con que subrayaba su forma de entender las relaciones entre parientes. De hecho, la señora Waule estaba habituada a pensar que comportarse de manera desagradable formaba parte de las intenciones del Todopoderoso para las familias. De manera que se alzó con calma del asiento sin dar muestra de sentirse ofendida y dijo con su habitual voz apagada y monótona:

—Hermano, espero que el nuevo médico sea capaz de hacer algo por ti. Solomon asegura que hacen muchos elogios de su inteligencia. Nadie desea más que yo que te restablezcas. Y no habría nadie más dispuesto a cuidarte que tu propia hermana y tus sobrinas, si quisieras que lo hiciésemos. Tienes a Rebecca y a Joanna y a Elizabeth, ya sabes.

—Sí, sí, lo recuerdo… Verás que me he acordado de todas: todas morenas y feas. Necesitarán algún dinero, ¿no es eso? Las mujeres de nuestra familia nunca han sido hermosas; pero los Featherstone siempre han tenido algún dinero y también los Waule. Waule también tenía dinero. Un hombre cordial, Waule. Sí, sí; el dinero es un huevo excelente; y si tienes dinero que dejar, ponlo en un nido tibio. Hasta la vista, señora Waule.

Al llegar aquí el señor Featherstone tiró con las dos manos de la peluca como para taparse los oídos, y su hermana se marchó rumiando aquellas ambiguas palabras suyas. A pesar de sus celos hacia los Vincy y hacia Mary Garth, seguía existiendo en el sedimento más hondo de sus escasas profundidades mentales el convencimiento de que Peter Featherstone nunca dejaría sus mejores posesiones en unas manos que no fueran las de sus parientes carnales; de lo contrario, ¿para qué se había llevado el Todopoderoso a sus dos esposas, las dos sin hijos, después de que Peter hubiese ganado tanto dinero con el manganeso y otras cosas que aparecieron cuando nadie lo esperaba? ¿Y por qué había una iglesia parroquial en Lowick, con los Waule y los Powderell sentados en el mismo banco durante generaciones y los Featherstone a su lado, si el domingo siguiente a la muerte de su hermano Peter todo el mundo iba a saber que su familia se había quedado sin sus propiedades? El espíritu humano no ha aceptado el caos moral en ninguna época; un resultado tan absurdo no era concebible en sentido estricto. Pero muchas cosas que no son estrictamente concebibles nos dan miedo.

Cuando Fred entró en la habitación, el anciano lo contempló con un peculiar destello en los ojos, que con frecuencia el más joven había tenido razones para interpretar como de orgullo por su apariencia, ya que el anciano la consideraba satisfactoria.

—Vosotras dos podéis iros —dijo el señor Featherstone—. Quiero hablar con Fred.

—Ven a mi cuarto, Rosamond; no te importará el frío si es por poco tiempo —dijo Mary. Las dos muchachas no solo se conocían desde niñas, sino que se habían educado juntas en el mismo internado (Mary en calidad de becaria), por lo que tenían muchos recuerdos comunes y cosas que decirse. De hecho, aquel *tête-à-tête* era uno de los objetivos de la expedición de Rosamond a Stone Court.

El viejo Featherstone no inició el diálogo hasta que se cerró la puerta. Siguió mirando a Fred con el mismo destello y con una de sus habituales muecas, torciendo y abriendo la boca alternativamente; y cuando habló, lo hizo en un tono tan bajo que podría haberse tomado más por el de un delator dispuesto a dejarse comprar que por el de un anciano que se siente ofendido. Featherstone no era un hombre propenso a las grandes indignaciones morales, incluso tratándose de faltas contra su persona. Era lógico que otros quisieran aprovecharse de él, pero el viejo Peter era demasiado astuto para ellos.

—De manera que has estado pagando el diez por ciento de intereses por un dinero que has prometido devolver hipotecando mis tierras cuando yo esté muerto y enterrado, ¿no es eso? Digamos que pones mi vida a doce meses. Pero todavía estoy a tiempo de cambiar el testamento.

Fred se sonrojó. No había conseguido dinero prestado de aquella manera y por excelentes razones. Pero sí había hablado con cierta confianza (quizá más de la que exactamente recordaba) sobre sus perspectivas de heredero como medio futuro de pagar deudas presentes.

—No sé a qué se refiere, tío. Desde luego nunca he pedido dinero prestado con una garantía tan poco segura. Haga el favor de explicármelo.

—No, señor, eres tú el que me lo tiene que explicar a mí. Déjame que te diga que estoy a tiempo de cambiar el testamento. Todavía tengo la cabeza en su sitio… Aún calculo intereses compuestos de memoria y recuerdo tan bien como hace veinte años el nombre de todos los tontos. ¡Qué diablos! Aún no he cumplido los ochenta. Ya me oyes, tienes que contradecirlo.

—Ya le he dicho que no es cierto —respondió Fred, mostrándose algo impaciente, sin recordar que si bien su tío no distinguía verbalmente entre contradecir y probar la falsedad de algo, nadie estaba más lejos de confundir las dos ideas que el viejo Featherstone, quien con frecuencia se asombraba de que muchos tontos aceptaran como prueba sus afirmaciones—. Pero lo haré de nuevo. Esa historia es una estupidez.

—¡Tonterías! Tienes que traer documentos. La información viene de alguien con autoridad.

—Pues que esa persona con autoridad dé el nombre de quien me ha prestado el dinero; después podré probar que la historia es falsa.

—Se trata de una persona con mucha autoridad, según creo: un hombre que sabe casi todo lo que sucede en Middlemarch. Ese excelente tío tuyo, tan religioso y caritativo. ¡Vamos, ya sabes de quién hablo! —Aquí el señor Featherstone tuvo uno de los peculiares estremecimientos interiores que indicaban regocijo.

—¿El señor Bulstrode?

—¿Quién, si no?

—En ese caso la historia ha crecido hasta convertirse en una mentira gracias a algunas palabras aleccionadoras que quizá haya dejado caer sobre mí. ¿Afirman esas personas conocer el nombre de quien me prestó el dinero?

—Si existe ese individuo, puedes estar seguro de que Bulstrode sabe quién es. Pero supongamos que solo trataste de conseguir que te prestaran dinero, pero no lo conseguiste… Bulstrode también lo sabría. Tráeme una carta de Bulstrode diciendo que no cree que hayas prometido pagar tus deudas con mis tierras, ¿qué me dices a eso?

El rostro del señor Featherstone requirió todo su repertorio de muecas como desahogo muscular de su silencioso triunfo al poner de manifiesto el buen estado de sus facultades.

Fred comprendió que se hallaba ante un desagradable dilema.

—Bromea usted, tío. El señor Bulstrode, como otros hombres, cree muchas cosas que no son ciertas, y tiene prejuicios contra mí. Sin duda lograré que reconozca por escrito no saber de ningún hecho que pruebe tales afirmaciones, aunque eso quizá ocasione alguna situación molesta. Pero difícilmente puedo pedirle que escriba lo que cree o deja de creer acerca de mí. —Fred se detuvo un instante, y luego añadió, haciendo un cortés llamamiento a la vanidad de su tío—: Desde luego no es una pregunta que pueda hacer un caballero.

Pero se llevó una desilusión con el resultado.

—Sí, ya sé lo que quieres decir. Prefieres ofenderme a mí antes que a Bulstrode. ¿Y quién es ese tío tuyo? Que yo sepa no tiene tierras por estos alrededores. Un individuo que se dedica a la especulación. Puede venirse abajo cualquier día, cuando el demonio deje de respaldarlo. Y eso es lo que su religión significa: quiere que Dios Todopoderoso intervenga a su favor. ¡Eso es una tontería! Hay una cosa que entendí muy bien cuando iba a la iglesia… y es esta: Dios Todopoderoso está de parte de la tierra. Dios promete tierra, da tierra, y hace a la gente rica con el maíz y el ganado. Pero tú te pones de la otra parte. Te gusta más Bulstrode y la especulación que Featherstone y la tierra.

—Perdóneme, tío —dijo Fred, poniéndose en pie, de espaldas al fuego y golpeándose la bota con la fusta —. Pero no me gustan ni Bulstrode ni la especulación. —Hablaba con bastante malhumor, dándose cuenta de que había llegado a un punto muerto.

—Bien, bien, puedes arreglártelas sin mí, eso está muy claro —dijo el viejo Featherstone, muy poco complacido en su interior ante la posibilidad de que Fred decidiera mostrarse independiente—. Te interesan más cien libras para salir del paso que un poco de tierra para convertirte en hacendado. A mí me da lo mismo. Estoy en condiciones de hacer cinco codicilos si quiero, y guardarme los billetes de banco como reserva. A mí me da igual.

Fred se ruborizó de nuevo. Featherstone le había regalado dinero muy pocas veces, y en aquel momento casi le resultaba más difícil renunciar a la inmediata perspectiva de unos billetes de banco que a la otra más lejana de unas tierras.

—No soy desagradecido, tío. Nunca ha sido mi intención mostrar indiferencia ante las pruebas de afecto que usted me da. Todo lo contrario.

—Muy bien. Entonces pruébalo. Tráeme una carta de Bulstrode en la que diga que no cree que te hayas ido de la lengua prometiendo pagar tus deudas con mis tierras, y entonces, si estás en un apuro, veremos de echarte una mano. ¿Qué te parece? Trato hecho. Vamos, deja que me apoye en tu brazo. Voy a intentar andar un poco por el cuarto.

Fred, a pesar de su irritación, era suficientemente bondadoso para sentir un poco de compasión por aquel anciano a quien nadie quería ni respetaba, y que, con sus piernas hinchadas, resultaba, al andar, aún más digno de piedad que en otros momentos. Mientras le ofrecía el brazo, pensó que no le gustaría ser un anciano con la salud destrozada; y esperó pacientemente a oír primero los acostumbrados comentarios sobre las gallinas pintadas y el gallo de la veleta frente a la ventana, y después las observaciones sobre la reducida biblioteca, cuyas principales glorias —encuadernadas en piel oscura— eran Josefo, Culpepper, el *Mesías* de Klopstock[33] y varios volúmenes de la *Revista del caballero*.

—Léeme los títulos de los libros. ¡Vamos! Eres universitario.

Fred se los leyó.

—¿Para qué quiere más libros esa chica? ¿Por qué tienes que traerle más libros?

—Le divierten, tío. Le gusta mucho leer.

—Demasiado —dijo el señor Featherstone con tono crítico—. Siempre es partidaria de leer cuando me hace compañía. Pero tuve que decir basta. Que lea el periódico si quiere leer en voz alta. Creo que es más que suficiente. No soporto verla leyendo a solas. Presta atención a lo que te digo y no le traigas más libros, ¿me oyes?

—Sí, tío, le oigo. —Fred había recibido antes aquella orden, desobedeciéndola en secreto. Y tenía intención de volver a hacerlo.

—Toca la campanilla —dijo el señor Featherstone—; quiero que baje esa chica.

Rosamond y Mary habían estado hablando más deprisa que los varones. No pensaron siquiera en sentarse, y se quedaron de pie junto al tocador cerca de la ventana, mientras Rosamond se quitaba el sombrero, se ajustaba el velo y con las puntas de los dedos se daba suaves toques a sus cabellos de un rubio infantil, no de color pajizo ni amarillos. Mary Garth parecía aún más insignificante situada entre aquellas dos ninfas: la de dentro y la de fuera del espejo, que se miraban con ojos de color azul celeste, lo bastante profundos para encerrar los más exquisitos significados que un ingenioso espectador pudiera poner en ellos y también para ocultar las intenciones de su propietaria si aconteciera que fuesen menos exquisitas. En Middlemarch solo algunos niños parecían rubios al lado de Rosamond, y la esbelta figura que revelaba el traje de montar poseía delicadas ondulaciones. De hecho, la mayoría de los hombres de Middlemarch, con la excepción de sus hermanos, sostenían que la señorita Vincy era la mejor muchacha del mundo, y algunos la consideraban un ángel. Mary Garth, por el contrario, tenía aspecto de vulgar pecadora, morena, de rizado pelo castaño, áspero y rebelde, y de poca estatura; y sería faltar a la verdad declararla —en satisfactoria antítesis— poseedora de todas las virtudes. La fealdad tiene sus peculiares tentaciones y vicios, al igual que la belleza, y se presta a fingir amabilidad o, en el caso de no fingirla, a mostrar en toda su crudeza el repulsivo rostro del descontento; en cualquier caso, que se llame fea a alguien, en contraste con la encantadora criatura que la acompaña, puede producir otros efectos aparte de reconocer que la afirmación se ajusta a la verdad y que la frase es adecuada. A los veintidós años Mary no había alcanzado aún el perfecto sentido común ni los firmes principios morales que se recomiendan de ordinario a las jóvenes menos afortunadas, como si fuera posible obtenerlos en cantidades ya mezcladas de antemano, con el oportuno sabor a resignación como complemento. Su sagacidad tenía una veta de amargura satírica que se renovaba de continuo y que nunca ocultaba por completo, excepto movida por una fuerte corriente de gratitud hacia quienes, en lugar de decirle que se contentara con su suerte, hacían algo para ayudarla a lograrlo. La proximidad de la plenitud femenina había dulcificado su fealdad, que tenía una gran calidad humana, como la que las madres de nuestra raza han lucido habitualmente en todas las latitudes bajo

tocados más o menos favorecedores. Rembrandt la habría pintado con placer, y logrado que sus rasgos un tanto toscos miraran hacia el exterior del lienzo con inteligente sinceridad. Porque la sinceridad, la rectitud que dice siempre la verdad, era la virtud más importante de Mary, que ni trataba de crear espejismos ni se abandonaba a ellos en provecho propio, y que si estaba de buen talante tenía suficiente humor para reírse de sí misma. Cuando Rosamond y ella se reflejaron al mismo tiempo en el espejo, dijo riendo:

—¡A tu lado no soy más que una mancha marrón, Rosy! Eres la más inconveniente de las compañeras.

—¡Qué va! Nadie se acuerda de tu aspecto, ¡eres tan razonable y tan útil, Mary! La belleza tiene muy poca importancia en realidad —dijo Rosamond, volviendo la cabeza hacia su amiga, pero desviando los ojos hacia una nueva perspectiva de su cuello en el espejo.

—Quieres decir mi belleza —replicó Mary, de manera bastante sarcástica.

Rosamond pensó: «Pobre Mary, se toma a mal hasta las observaciones más amables». Y en voz alta dijo:

—¿Qué has estado haciendo últimamente?

—¿Yo? Ocuparme de la casa… administrar medicinas… fingir que soy amable y que estoy contenta… aprender a tener mala opinión de todo el mundo.

—Es una vida terrible.

—No —dijo Mary, lacónicamente, con un leve movimiento de cabeza—. Creo que mi vida es más agradable que la de vuestra señorita Morgan.

—Sí; pero la señorita Morgan es una persona muy poco interesante y nada joven.

—Es interesante para ella misma, supongo; y no estoy nada segura de que todo resulte más fácil cuando nos hacemos viejos.

—No —dijo Rosamond, reflexivamente—; una se pregunta qué hacen esas personas, sin esperanzas de ninguna clase. Está la religión como ayuda, por supuesto, pero —añadió, luciendo sus hoyuelos al sonreír— tu caso es muy diferente, Mary. Quizá te pidan en matrimonio.

—¿Es que alguien te ha dicho que piense hacerlo?

—Claro que no. Quiero decir que hay un caballero que puede enamorarse de ti, viéndote casi todos los días.

Cierto cambio que se produjo en el rostro de Mary estuvo motivado sobre todo por la decisión de no dejar traslucir el menor cambio.

—¿Es que eso hace que la gente se enamore? —respondió despreocupadamente—; creo que con la misma frecuencia sirve para que las personas se detesten.

—No cuando son interesantes y agradables. He oído decir que el señor Lydgate es las dos cosas.

—¡Ah, el señor Lydgate! —exclamó Mary, con una inconfundible recaída en la indiferencia—. Quieres saber algo acerca de él —añadió, decidida a no dar pábulo a los métodos indirectos de Rosamond.

—Tan solo saber si te gusta.

—En el momento presente es un problema que no se me plantea. Mis simpatías siempre necesitan un poco de amabilidad para encenderse. No soy lo bastante magnánima para que me gusten las personas que me hablan dando la impresión de que no me ven.

—¿Tan altivo es? —dijo Rosamond, con intensa satisfacción—. ¿Sabías que es de muy buena familia?

—No; no lo ha dado como uno de sus motivos.

—¡Mary!, eres la más extraña de las chicas. Pero ¿qué aspecto tiene? Descríbemelo.

—¿Cómo se describe a un hombre? Puedo hacerte un inventario: cejas marcadas, ojos oscuros, nariz recta, cabellos espesos y oscuros, manos blancas grandes y sólidas y… déjame ver… ¡ah sí!, un exquisito pañuelo de holanda. Pero lo conocerás en seguida. No ignoras que hace sus visitas hacia esta hora.

Rosamond se ruborizó un poco, pero dijo con aire meditativo:

—Creo que prefiero una actitud altiva. No soporto a los jóvenes demasiado ruidosos.

—No he dicho que el señor Lydgate fuese altivo; pero *il y en a pour tous les gôuts*, como la pequeña *mademoiselle* solía decir, y si alguna chica está en condiciones de elegir el tipo particular de engreimiento que prefiere, creo que esa eres tú, Rosy.

—La altivez no es engreimiento: yo llamo engreído a Fred.

—Me gustaría que nadie dijera nada peor de él. Debería tener más cuidado. La señora Waule le ha estado diciendo al tío que Fred es inconstante. —Mary hablaba dejándose llevar por un impulso infantil que pudo más que su buen sentido. Había un vago malestar asociado a la palabra «inconstante» que esperaba que se disipara con algo que dijese Rosamond. Pero se abstuvo, a propósito, de mencionar la insinuación más específica de la señora Waule.

—¡Fred es horrible! —dijo Rosamond, que no se hubiera permitido una palabra tan impropia hablando con otra persona que no fuese Mary.

—¿Por qué horrible?

—Es muy perezoso, hace que papá se enfade mucho, y asegura que no quiere ordenarse.

—Creo que Fred tiene toda la razón.

—¿Cómo puedes decir eso, Mary? Creía que tenías sentimientos religiosos más acendrados.

—No sirve para clérigo.

—Pues tendría que servir.

—Bien, en ese caso Fred no es lo que tendría que ser. Conozco a otras personas que están en la misma situación.

—Nadie aprueba su comportamiento. No me gustaría casarme con un clérigo, pero debe haberlos.

—De ahí no se sigue que Fred tenga que serlo.

—¡Pero papá se ha gastado mucho dinero en su educación! Y supongamos que no tenga dinero propio el día de mañana.

—No me cuesta ningún trabajo suponerlo —dijo Mary fríamente.

—Entonces me pregunto cómo puedes defender a Fred —dijo Rosamond, inclinada a insistir en aquel punto.

—No lo defiendo —dijo Mary, riendo—; evitaría que cualquier parroquia lo tuviese como clérigo.

—No cabe duda de que si fuese clérigo tendría que ser diferente.

—Sí, sería un hipócrita redomado, cosa que todavía no es.

—Es inútil hablar contigo de nada, Mary. Siempre te pones de parte de Fred.

—¿Por qué no? —dijo Mary, animándose—. Él haría lo mismo. Es la única persona que se toma molestias para complacerme.

—Haces que me sienta muy incómoda, Mary —dijo Rosamond con una mansedumbre teñida de seriedad —; no se lo contaría a mamá por nada del mundo.

—¿Qué es lo que no le contarías? —dijo Mary, enfadada.

—Haz el favor de no enojarte, Mary —dijo Rosamond con la misma mansedumbre.

—Si tu madre tiene miedo de que Fred me pida en matrimonio, dile que no lo aceptaría aunque me lo pidiese. Pero no va a hacerlo, que yo sepa. Desde luego no me lo ha pedido nunca.

—Siempre eres muy violenta, Mary.

—Y tú siempre consigues exasperarme.

—¿Yo? ¿De qué tengo yo la culpa?

—¡Ah!, las personas intachables son siempre las más exasperantes. Ha sonado la campanilla. Creo que debemos bajar.

—No era mi intención que nos peleáramos —dijo Rosamond poniéndose el sombrero.

—¿Pelearnos? Tonterías; no nos hemos peleado. Si una no se puede enfadar de vez en cuando, ¿de qué sirve ser amigas?

—¿Puedo contar lo que has dicho?

—Como quieras. Nunca cuento cosas que no quiero que se sepan. Será mejor que bajemos.

El señor Lydgate se retrasó aquella mañana, pero los visitantes se quedaron lo suficiente para verlo, porque el señor Featherstone pidió a Rosamond que cantara, y ella fue lo suficientemente amable para obsequiarle con otra de las canciones favoritas del anciano —*Sigue fluyendo, río resplandeciente*—, después de haber interpretado *Hogar, dulce hogar* (que la señorita Vincy detestaba cordialmente). Aquel astuto Overreach[34] de avanzada edad veía con buenos ojos la canción sentimental, considerándola adecuado ornamento para las muchachas, y también básicamente buena, porque el sentimiento era ingrediente imprescindible en una melodía.

El señor Featherstone aplaudía aún la última interpretación, asegurando a la cantante que su voz era tan cristalina como la de un mirlo, cuando el caballo del señor Lydgate pasó ante la ventana.

La perspectiva poco prometedora de otra visita a un anciano paciente —que creía casi a pies juntillas que las medicinas le «devolverían la salud» si su médico fuera lo bastante listo—, añadida al total escepticismo de Lydgate sobre los encantos de Middlemarch, compusieron un fondo doblemente eficaz para su primer encuentro con Rosamond, a quien el viejo Featherstone se apresuró a presentar muy satisfecho como sobrina suya, aunque nunca se le había ocurrido que mereciera la pena hablar de Mary Garth en los mismos términos. Lydgate no perdió detalle de los elegantes modales de Rosamond: con cuánta delicadeza y calma aceptó la repentina notoriedad ocasionada por la rudeza del anciano, y cómo solo puso de realce sus hoyuelos al hablar después con Mary, a quien se dirigió con tan bondadoso interés que Lydgate, luego de examinar a la señorita Garth con más detenimiento que nunca, no pudo por menos de descubrir una adorable amabilidad en los ojos de Rosamond. Mary, por alguna razón, parecía más bien malhumorada.

—La señorita Rosy ha estado cantando para mí… No tendrá usted nada que decir en contra de eso, ¿eh, doctor? —dijo el señor Featherstone—. Lo prefiero a sus medicinas.

—Eso ha hecho que me olvidara de cómo pasa el tiempo —dijo Rosamond, levantándose para recoger el sombrero, que se había quitado antes de cantar, para que su cabeza, semejante a una flor sobre su blanco tallo, pudiera verse perfectamente por encima del traje de montar—. Fred, no tenemos más remedio que marcharnos.

—Muy bien —dijo Fred, que tenía sus propias razones para no estar de muy buen humor, y quería marcharse.

—¿La señorita Vincy cultiva la música? —dijo Lydgate, siguiéndola con los ojos. (Todos los nervios y músculos de Rosamond respondían al unísono al hecho de saberse contemplada. Era por naturaleza actriz de los diferentes papeles que encajaban con su físico: Rosamond representaba incluso su propio personaje, y lo hacía tan bien que ignoraba que fuese precisamente el suyo).

—No hay nadie que cante mejor en Middlemarch, apostaría cualquier cosa —dijo el señor Featherstone —, y que ella misma decida quién viene detrás. ¿Eh, Fred? Intervén en favor de tu hermana.

—Temo que sería juez y parte. Mi testimonio no serviría de nada.

—El nivel de Middlemarch no es muy bueno, tío —dijo Rosamond, con encantadora delicadeza, encaminándose hacia donde había dejado la fusta.

Lydgate se le anticipó, apoderándose de ella antes de que la cogiese Rosamond, y se volvió para ofrecérsela. La señorita Vincy le hizo una inclinación de cabeza y lo miró: él la contemplaba, por supuesto, y sus ojos se encontraron de esa manera peculiar a la que nunca se llega mediante el esfuerzo, sino que parece una repentina desaparición de la niebla por intervención divina. Creo que Lydgate palideció un poco, pero Rosamond se ruborizó intensamente y sintió cierto asombro. Después quiso marcharse a toda prisa, y no supo qué tonterías estaba diciendo su tío cuando se acercó a estrecharle la mano.

Aquella turbación, sin embargo, a la que se da el nombre de enamoramiento, y que Rosamond consideró mutua, era exactamente lo que había planeado. Desde la llegada de Lydgate a Middlemarch, la señorita Vincy fue entretejiendo la previsión de un futuro inmediato al que precedía, como principio necesario, algo parecido a aquella escena. Los forasteros, tanto en calidad de víctimas de un naufragio agarradas a una balsa, como debidamente escoltados y acompañados de baúles, siempre han ejercido una fascinación directa sobre los espíritus virginales, contra la que el mérito indígena se esfuerza en vano por luchar. Y un forastero era absolutamente esencial para la aventura romántica de Rosamond dentro de la sociedad, aventura que siempre había girado en torno a un amante y novio que no fuese de Middlemarch y que no tuviera en absoluto unos lazos familiares como los suyos; últimamente, a decir verdad, los planes parecían exigir que estuviese emparentado de algún modo con un baronet. Ahora que ella y el forastero se habían conocido, la realidad se revelaba mucho más emotiva de lo previsto, y Rosamond no dudó de que aquel era un momento culminante de su vida. Interpretó aquellos síntomas como los del amor que nace, y consideró del todo natural que el señor Lydgate se hubiese enamorado de ella nada más verla. Cosas así suceden con mucha frecuencia en los bailes y ¿por qué no con luz matutina, cuando la delicadeza del cutis resulta todavía más patente? Rosamond, aun sin tener más años que Mary, estaba bastante acostumbrada a que los hombres se prendaran de ella, y se mostraba indiferente y crítica tanto ante el jovenzuelo lozano como ante el solterón descolorido. Y allí estaba el señor Lydgate, encarnando de pronto su ideal: completamente ajeno a Middlemarch, con cierto aire de distinción característico de una buena familia y con lazos de sangre que abrían la posibilidad de ese paraíso de la clase media: el rango social; un hombre de talento, además, a quien resultaría especialmente placentero esclavizar; un hombre, en fin, que había hecho mella en Rosamond de manera totalmente nueva, introduciendo un interés en su vida mucho más intenso que cualquier «podría ser» imaginario, como los que estaba acostumbrada a contraponer a la realidad.

En vista de que tanto el hermano como la hermana estaban preocupados, los dos se mostraron inclinados al silencio mientras volvían a casa. Rosamond, aunque la base para sus construcciones mentales careciera de consistencia, poseía una imaginación realista y muy detallada, y antes de que hubieran recorrido un par de kilómetros había avanzado mucho con el vestido de novia y las circunstancias de su vida de casada; también había decidido cuál sería su hogar en Middlemarch y previsto las visitas que haría a los parientes distantes y aristocráticos de su marido, de cuyos impecables modales se apropiaría tan exhaustivamente como hiciera antes con los conocimientos que le proporcionó el internado de la señora Lemon, preparándose así para ascensos sociales más imprecisos que pudieran producirse en el futuro. No había ningún matiz económico, y menos aún sórdido, en sus previsiones: le interesaba el refinamiento, y no el dinero preciso para financiarlo.

Los pensamientos de Fred, por otro lado, se veían asaltados por una ansiedad que ni siquiera su fácil

optimismo era capaz de acallar de inmediato. No encontraba manera de eludir la estúpida petición de Featherstone sin que se produjeran unas consecuencias que le desagradaban aún más que cumplir el encargo. Su padre ya estaba predispuesto contra él, y aún se enfadaría más si se convertía en motivo para una mayor frialdad entre su familia y la de Bulstrode. Además, tampoco a él le gustaba tener que hablar con su tío Bulstrode, y quizá era cierto que después de beber un poco de vino había dicho muchas tonterías sobre las propiedades de Featherstone, tonterías más tarde exageradas en el relato. Fred comprendía que quedaba muy malparado fanfarroneando primero sobre sus esperanzas de heredar a un viejo tan extraño y avariento como Featherstone, y mendigando después certificados a petición suya. En cuanto a las esperanzas de heredar, era cierto que las tenía, y no contaba con ninguna alternativa digna de mención si renunciaba a ellas; últimamente, además, había contraído una deuda que le molestaba de manera muy especial, y el viejo Featherstone casi se había comprometido a pagarla. Todo el asunto resultaba un tanto mezquino: sus deudas eran pequeñas, e incluso sus esperanzas no eran demasiado espléndidas. Fred había conocido a hombres a quienes les hubiera dado vergüenza confesar la pequeñez de sus apuros. Semejantes reflexiones producían, como es lógico, una veta de amarga misantropía. A él le tocaba ser hijo de un fabricante de Middlemarch, e inevitablemente heredero de nada en particular, mientras que hombres tales como Mainwaring y Vyan… Sin duda la vida era un asunto muy triste, cuando un joven fogoso, con deseos de disfrutar de lo mejor en todos los terrenos, tenía perspectivas tan poco brillantes.

A Fred no se le había ocurrido que la aparición del nombre de Bulstrode en aquel asunto fuese una invención del viejo Featherstone; y en cualquier caso tampoco habría mejorado su situación. Veía con suficiente claridad que el anciano quería hacer uso de su poder atormentándolo un poco, procurándose además el placer de ponerlo en una situación delicada con Bulstrode. Fred se imaginaba capaz de penetrar hasta el fondo en el alma de su tío Featherstone, aunque en realidad la mitad de lo que allí veía era un simple reflejo de sus propias inclinaciones. La difícil tarea de conocer a otra alma no es la más indicada para jóvenes caballeros con un universo mental básicamente formado por sus propios deseos.

El punto fundamental del debate de Fred consigo mismo era si debía contárselo a su padre o tratar de resolver el problema sin que el señor Vincy se enterara. Probablemente era la señora Waule quien había hablado de él; y si Mary Garth había repetido las palabras de la señora Waule a Rosamond, la noticia llegaría hasta su padre, quien sin duda alguna le interrogaría al respecto. Cuando redujeron un poco la marcha, le preguntó a Rosamond:

—Rosy, ¿te ha contado Mary si la señora Waule había dicho algo de mí?

—Sí, efectivamente, algo ha dicho.

—¿Qué ha sido?

—Que eras muy inconstante.

—¿Eso es todo?

—A mí me parece bastante.

—¿Estás segura de que solo dijo eso?

—Mary no ha mencionado nada más. De verdad, Fred, creo que deberías avergonzarte.

—¡Tonterías! Haz el favor de no sermonearme. ¿Qué opina Mary?

—No estoy obligada a contártelo. Te interesa demasiado todo lo que dice Mary, y eres tan grosero que no me permites hablar.

—Claro que me interesa lo que dice Mary. Es la mejor chica que conozco.

—Nunca pensé que fuese una muchacha de la que alguien pudiera enamorarse.

—¿Cómo sabes tú de quién se enamoran los hombres? Las chicas nunca lo saben.

—Al menos, Fred, déjame aconsejarte que no te enamores de ella; dice que si se lo pidieras no se casaría contigo.

—Podía haber esperado a que se lo preguntara.

—Sabía que te iba a molestar.

—En absoluto. No lo habría dicho si tú no la hubieras provocado.

Antes de llegar a casa, Fred decidió contarle todo el asunto a su padre con la mayor sencillez posible; quizá el señor Vincy tomara a su cargo la desagradable tarea de hablar con Bulstrode.

Libro segundo

Viejos y jóvenes

Capítulo XIII

PRIMER CABALLERO: ¿Cómo calificar a tu personaje…? ¿Como mejor que la mayoría, o mejor tan solo en apariencia,
y peor debajo de la capa que lo cubre?
¿Como santo o como sinvergüenza, como peregrino o como hipócrita?
SEGUNDO CABALLERO: Más bien, dime cómo clasificas los libros que tienes,
las amontonadas reliquias que deja el tiempo. Lo mismo daría distribuirlos de inmediato por el tamaño y la traza:
pergamino, ejemplares con amplios márgenes, y los más corrientes encuadernados en piel
difícilmente abarcarían mayor diversidad que tus etiquetas hábilmente ideadas
para clasificar a los autores que no has leído.

Como resultado de lo que Fred le contó, el señor Vincy decidió hablar con Bulstrode en su despacho del banco a la una y media, momento en que de ordinario se hallaba libre de otras visitas. Pero alguien se había presentado a la una, y el señor Bulstrode tenía tantas cosas que decirle que había muy pocas posibilidades de que la entrevista concluyera en el espacio de media hora. El banquero tenía el verbo fácil, pero también copioso, y gastaba una apreciable cantidad de tiempo haciendo breves pausas reflexivas. No debe suponerse que su aspecto enfermizo fuera del tipo amarillento con cabellos negros: tenía una piel pálida pero blanca, cabellos castaños salpicados de canas, ojos de color gris claro y una frente muy grande. Los hombres que hablaban muy fuerte decían que su voz no era suave, sino baja, y a veces daban a entender que estaba reñida con la franqueza, aunque no parezca que existan razones para que un hombre que habla alto no esté dispuesto a ocultar cualquier cosa excepto su propia voz, a no ser que se pueda demostrar que, según la Sagrada Escritura, el asiento de la franqueza se halle en los pulmones. El señor Bulstrode tenía también tendencia a inclinarse respetuosamente al escuchar y una fijeza en la mirada que, a las personas que se consideraban dignas de ser oídas, las llevaba a la conclusión de que procuraba sacar todo el provecho posible de sus palabras. Otros, que no esperaban hacer una gran figura, encontraban molesto verse iluminados por aquella especie de linterna moral. Quien no está orgulloso de su bodega no se siente particularmente satisfecho cuando un huésped alza el vaso de vino hacia la luz y lo contempla con aire imparcial. Tales alegrías están reservadas para quienes tienen conciencia de sus méritos. De aquí que el perseverante escrutinio del señor Bulstrode no resultara agradable para los publicanos y pecadores de Middlemarch; algunos lo atribuían a su fariseísmo; otros, a su adscripción al evangelismo. Los pensadores más profundos querían saber quiénes eran su padre y su abuelo, recalcando que veinticinco años antes nadie había oído hablar de ningún Bulstrode en Middlemarch. A su visitante de aquel momento, Lydgate, la mirada escrutadora del banquero le resultaba por completo indiferente: le servía tan solo para formarse una desfavorable opinión sobre la salud de su interlocutor y para concluir que poseía una intensa vida interior y que disfrutaba muy poco con las cosas tangibles.

—Le quedaré sumamente agradecido si viene usted a verme de cuando en cuando, señor Lydgate —hizo notar el banquero, después de una breve pausa—. Si, como me atrevo a esperar, tengo el privilegio de hallar en usted un valioso colaborador en el interesante asunto de la administración de hospitales, habrá muchos problemas que necesitaremos discutir en privado. En cuanto al hospital nuevo, que está casi terminado, tomaré en consideración lo que me ha dicho sobre las ventajas de dedicarlo especialmente a las fiebres. Seré yo quien deba tomar la decisión, porque si bien lord Medlicote ha dado los terrenos y la madera para el edificio, no está en condiciones de dedicar su atención personal a esta empresa.

—Hay pocas cosas que merezcan tanto la pena como esta en una ciudad de provincias —dijo Lydgate—.

Un buen hospital para casos de fiebre, además de la vieja enfermería, puede ser el núcleo de una escuela de medicina, una vez que se aprueben las reformas médicas; y ¿qué podrá contribuir tanto a la educación médica como la difusión de semejantes escuelas por todo el país? Un hombre nacido en provincias que tenga un mínimo de espíritu cívico, además de unas cuantas ideas, debe hacer lo que pueda para oponerse a que Londres absorba todo lo que esté por encima de lo corriente. Cualquier meta profesional válida puede encontrar en provincias un campo más libre y, con frecuencia, hasta más rico.

Uno de los talentos de Lydgate era su forma de emplear la voz, habitualmente grave y sonora y, sin embargo, capaz de hacerse muy suave en el momento oportuno. En el porte del joven médico había un componente de audacia, una intrépida seguridad en el éxito, una confianza en su propia capacidad e integridad, muy reforzadas por el desprecio hacia obstáculos mezquinos o hacia tentaciones que nunca había sentido. Pero esta orgullosa sinceridad no resultaba desagradable porque iba acompañada de auténtica buena voluntad. Quizá al señor Bulstrode le gustaba Lydgate especialmente por la diferencia entre su propio tono de voz y sus modales y los del médico; también lo prefería, sin duda, como le sucedía a Rosamond, por ser forastero. ¡Se pueden empezar tantas cosas con una persona nueva! Se puede empezar incluso a ser un hombre mejor.

—Me alegraré mucho de proporcionarle oportunidades más amplias para su celo profesional —respondió el señor Bulstrode—; hablo de confiarle la dirección de mi nuevo hospital, en el caso de que datos más precisos favorezcan esa decisión, porque estoy decidido a que un proyecto tan importante no se vea obstaculizado por los dos médicos con los que ya contamos. Más aún, me siento inclinado a considerar su llegada a esta ciudad como una misericordiosa indicación de que mis esfuerzos, que hasta ahora han encontrado muchas cortapisas, van a verse recompensados con resultados más positivos. Con respecto a la vieja enfermería, hemos dado ya el primer paso: me refiero al hecho de que haya sido usted elegido. Y ahora espero que no tenga inconveniente en despertar los celos de sus colegas ni en disgustarlos presentándose como reformador.

—No voy a presumir de valor —dijo Lydgate, sonriendo—, pero reconozco que luchar me produce placer y no me interesaría mi profesión si no creyera que en ella, como en todas las demás, hay que descubrir mejores métodos y ponerlos en práctica.

—El nivel de su profesión es bajo en Middlemarch, mi querido señor —dijo el banquero—. Hablo de los conocimientos teóricos y prácticos, no de consideración social, porque nuestros médicos están en su mayor parte relacionados con personas muy respetables. La poca salud me ha impulsado a dedicar cierta atención a los recursos terapéuticos que la Divina Misericordia ha puesto a nuestro alcance. He consultado con hombres eminentes de la metrópoli y, por desgracia, me consta el atraso de los tratamientos médicos en provincias.

—Sí; dadas las reglas y la educación médica actuales, hay que conformarse con encontrar de vez en cuando un médico competente. En cuanto a los problemas más profundos que determinan el punto de partida de un diagnóstico en cuanto a la teoría de las pruebas médicas, cualquier atisbo en ese sentido solo puede venir de una cultura científica con la que habitualmente los médicos rurales están tan poco familiarizados como los habitantes de la luna.

El señor Bulstrode, que se había inclinado hacia adelante y contemplaba muy fijamente a su interlocutor, descubrió que la forma utilizada por Lydgate para expresar su asentimiento no se adecuaba plenamente a su capacidad de comprensión. En semejantes circunstancias un hombre juicioso cambia de tema y elige un terreno donde sus dotes puedan serle más útiles.

—Me doy cuenta —dijo— de la especial inclinación de la ciencia médica a los medios materiales. No obstante, señor Lydgate, espero que no tengamos actitudes contrapuestas respecto a una medida en la que no es probable que tenga usted un interés activo, pero en la que contar con su apoyo puede resultarme de ayuda. Confío en que reconozca usted la existencia de intereses espirituales en sus pacientes.

—Así es, desde luego. Pero esas palabras se prestan a encerrar significados diferentes para mentalidades distintas.

—Exacto. Y en este asunto las falsas enseñanzas son tan funestas como su ausencia. Ahora bien, algo que me interesa muchísimo es lograr un nuevo reglamento sobre la asistencia religiosa a la vieja enfermería. El edificio se halla en la parroquia del señor Farebrother. ¿Conoce usted al señor Farebrother?

—Lo he visto alguna vez. Votó por mí. Tengo que hacerle una visita para darle las gracias. Parece un hombrecillo muy inteligente y agradable. Y tengo entendido que es naturalista.

—El señor Farebrother, mi querido señor, es un hombre sobre el que resulta muy doloroso reflexionar. Supongo que no hay en este país otro clérigo con mayores talentos.

—Todavía no he encontrado en Middlemarch ningún talento excesivo que me haya producido una

dolorosa impresión —dijo Lydgate con brusquedad.

—Mi deseo —continuó el señor Bulstrode, adoptando una expresión aún más grave— es que la asistencia del señor Farebrother al viejo hospital quede invalidada por el nombramiento de un capellán, el señor Tyke, en concreto, y que no se solicite la presencia de ninguna otra ayuda espiritual.

—Como médico no podría tener opinión sobre ese punto sin conocer al señor Tyke, e incluso entonces sería necesario que estuviera al tanto de los casos en que ha intervenido. —Lydgate sonrió, pero estaba resuelto a mostrarse circunspecto.

—Claro está que no puede usted valorar con pleno conocimiento las ventajas de esta medida en el momento presente. Pero —aquí el señor Bulstrode empezó a hablar con mayor énfasis— es posible que se someta al examen de la junta médica de la enfermería, y lo que yo quisiera pedirle es que, en virtud de la cooperación entre nosotros que espero ya con interés, no se deje usted influir por mis oponentes en este asunto.

—Confío en no tener nada que ver con litigios clericales —dijo Lydgate—. El camino que he elegido es el de trabajar lo mejor que pueda en mi profesión.

—Mis responsabilidades, señor Lydgate, son de carácter más amplio. Para mí, en verdad, este asunto tiene un valor trascendente; en el caso de mis oponentes, por el contrario, estoy convencido de que se trata tan solo de satisfacer una voluntad de oposición puramente mundana. Y yo, en consecuencia, no renunciaré a ninguna de mis convicciones, ni dejaré de identificarme con la verdad odiada por una generación perversa. Estoy decidido a llevar a cabo la reforma hospitalaria, pero le confesaré sin ambages, señor Lydgate, que no sentiría el menor interés por los hospitales si su única finalidad fuera la curación de las enfermedades. Existe para mí otro campo de acción, y no lo ocultaría aunque ello me acarreara persecución.

La voz del señor Bulstrode se había convertido en un agitado susurro mientras pronunciaba las últimas palabras.

—En eso discrepamos, sin duda —dijo Lydgate. Pero no lamentó que se abriera la puerta para anunciar al señor Vincy. Aquel personaje rubicundo y sociable le resultaba más interesante desde que había visto a Rosamond. No era que, a semejanza de la joven, el médico hubiera estado tejiendo un futuro en el que sus destinos se unieran; pero los hombres recuerdan con placer a una muchacha encantadora y están dispuestos a cenar donde puedan volver a verla. Antes de que Lydgate se marchara, el señor Vincy ya lo había invitado a su casa, aunque anteriormente hubiera dicho que «no le corría ninguna prisa» hacerlo, porque durante el desayuno Rosamond mencionó que, en su opinión, su tío Featherstone veía con muy buenos ojos al nuevo médico.

El señor Bulstrode, a solas con su cuñado, se sirvió un vaso de agua y abrió la fiambrera.

—¿No lograré nunca persuadirte para que adoptes mi régimen, Vincy?

—No, no; no me satisface ese sistema. La vida necesita almohadillado —dijo su interlocutor, incapaz de no mencionar su teoría favorita—. Pero he venido a hablarte —continuó, acentuando las palabras, como para dejar de lado cualquier banalidad— de una menudencia relativa a ese joven bribón que tengo en casa, mi hijo Fred.

—Ese es un tema en el que tú y yo podemos tener opiniones tan distintas como sobre la dieta, Vincy.

—Espero que no sea así esta vez. —El señor Vincy estaba decidido a mostrarse conciliador—. Se trata de un capricho del viejo Featherstone. Alguien sin otro motivo que el despecho ha inventado una historia y se la ha contado al anciano para intentar ponerlo en contra del chico. Featherstone siente mucho cariño por mi hijo, y es posible que haga algo por él; en realidad, casi le ha dicho que tiene intención de dejarle sus tierras, y eso hace que otras personas sientan celos.

—Debo repetirte, Vincy, que no conseguirás ninguna colaboración por mi parte en cuanto a la trayectoria que has seguido con tu hijo primogénito. Lo destinaste a la Iglesia enteramente por razones de vanidad mundana, y con una familia de tres hijos y cuatro hijas no estaba justificado que gastaras tanto dinero en una costosa educación que solo ha servido para acostumbrarlo a la indolencia. Y ahora estás recogiendo las consecuencias.

Señalar los errores de otras personas era un deber al que el señor Bulstrode renunciaba en muy pocas ocasiones, pero la paciencia del señor Vincy no alcanzaba cimas tan altas. Cuando un hombre abriga la esperanza de convertirse muy pronto en alcalde, y está dispuesto, en interés del comercio, a adoptar una actitud firme en política, tiene, como es lógico, una clara conciencia de su importancia en el entramado social, importancia que parece relegar las cuestiones de la conducta privada a un segundo término. Y aquel reproche, en especial, irritaba al señor Vincy más que cualquier otro. Consideraba de todo punto superfluo que se le dijera que estaba cosechando las consecuencias de sus actos. Pero también sentía el cuello bajo el

yugo de Bulstrode; y aunque de ordinario disfrutaba dando coces contra el aguijón, no quería de ningún modo permitirse ahora ese consuelo.

—Lo cierto es que no sirve de nada volver atrás. No soy uno de tus hombres modelo, y no pretendo serlo. Yo no podía prever todo lo que iba a pasar en el comercio; no había en Middlemarch otro negocio mejor que el nuestro, y el chico es inteligente. Mi pobre hermano estaba en la Iglesia, y le habría ido bien… Ya le habían dado un puesto mejor, pero aquella fiebre estomacal se lo llevó: de lo contrario quizá fuese deán a estas alturas. Creo que lo que intenté hacer por Fred estaba justificado. Cuando se trata de religión, me parece que un hombre no debe trinchar ni una onza de carne antes de tiempo; hay que confiar un poco en la Providencia y ser generoso. Considero muy inglés y muy moral esforzarse por elevar un poco a la propia familia: en mi opinión, un padre está obligado a dar a sus hijos las mejores oportunidades.

—Solo deseo comportarme como tu mejor amigo al asegurarte que las cosas que acabas de decir no son sino un montón de frivolidades y de locuras sin fundamento.

—Muy bien —dijo el señor Vincy, coceando a pesar de sus buenos propósitos—. Nunca he pretendido ser otra cosa que mundano; y, lo que es más, no veo a nadie que no lo sea. No veo que dirijas tus negocios con principios espirituales. Para mí la única diferencia es que el espíritu mundano de una clase es un poco más sincero que el de otra.

—Este tipo de conversación no produce ningún fruto —dijo el señor Bulstrode que, al terminar su sándwich, se había recostado en la silla, cubriéndose los ojos como si estuviera fatigado—. Tenías algún asunto más concreto que tratar.

—Sí, sí. Lo que sucede, en pocas palabras, es que alguien le ha contado al viejo Featherstone, poniéndote por testigo, que Fred ha conseguido o ha tratado de conseguir dinero prestado dando sus tierras como garantía. Tú no has dicho nunca una tontería semejante, por supuesto. Pero el viejo insiste en que Fred le lleve una negativa de tu puño y letra; es decir, solo dos palabras diciendo que no crees una palabra de semejante historia, ni lo de recibir dinero prestado ni lo de haber tratado de conseguirlo de esa manera tan estúpida. Supongo que no tendrás objeciones a hacer eso.

—Perdóname. Sí que tengo una objeción. No estoy en absoluto seguro de que tu hijo, en su atolondramiento e ignorancia (no voy a usar palabras más duras), no haya tratado de obtener dinero utilizando sus expectativas, ni tampoco de que alguien no haya sido lo bastante estúpido para prestárselo basándose en tan dudosa conjetura: esa forma de prestar dinero es tan habitual como otras muchas locuras.

—Pero Fred me da su palabra de honor de que nunca ha obtenido dinero simulando ningún tipo de acuerdo sobre las tierras de su tío. Y Fred no es mentiroso. No quiero hacerle mejor de lo que es. Me he enfadado mucho con él; nadie puede decir que finja no enterarme de lo que hace. Pero no es mentiroso. Y yo pensaba, aunque quizá esté equivocado, que ninguna religión prohíbe creer en la inocencia de un joven mientras no se tengan pruebas en contra. Me parecería una actitud muy poco religiosa que pusieras trabas a alguien negándote a decir que crees en su inocencia cuando careces de buenas razones para pensar lo contrario.

—No estoy nada seguro de hacerle un favor a tu hijo facilitándole el camino para que consiga las tierras de Featherstone. No considero que la riqueza sea una bendición para quienes la usan en este mundo sin pensar en el más allá. No te gusta oír estas cosas, Vincy, pero en esta ocasión me siento obligado a decirte que no encuentro razones para fomentar que se dé a la propiedad el uso al que te has referido. No tengo empacho en decir que no contribuirá ni a la felicidad eterna de tu hijo ni a la gloria de Dios. En consecuencia, ¿por qué esperas que redacte ese affidávit, que solo tiene por objeto mantener una predilección infundada y asegurar un legado absurdo?

—Si te propones lograr que solo tengan dinero los santos y las personas evangélicas, tú mismo tendrás que renunciar a algunas provechosas asociaciones, es lo único que se me ocurre —estalló el señor Vincy con gran contundencia—. Quizá sea para gloria de Dios, pero desde luego no da mucha gloria a la industria de Middlemarch que la casa Plymdale use esos tintes azules y verdes que recibe de la fábrica de Brassing, porque echan a perder la seda, es lo único que sé. Tal vez si otras personas supieran que gran parte de los beneficios son para la gloria de Dios, no les parecería tan mal. Pero a mí eso no me importa demasiado… Podría organizar un buen escándalo, si me lo propusiera.

El señor Bulstrode hizo una breve pausa antes de contestar.

—Me resulta muy doloroso oírte hablar de esa manera. No espero que comprendas los motivos de mis acciones. No es fácil encontrar una senda para los principios divinos entre las complejidades del mundo… y aún más difícil que resulte clara para los descuidados y los cínicos. Debes recordar, si haces el favor, que exagero mi tolerancia hacia ti por ser hermano de mi mujer, y que no te corresponde quejarte de mí como si no te ayudara a conservar la… posición social de tu familia. No olvides que no ha sido ni tu prudencia ni

tu buen juicio lo que ha permitido que mantengas tu puesto en el comercio.

—Es muy posible que no; pero tú no has salido perdiendo con ello, que yo sepa —dijo el señor Vincy, terriblemente irritado (cosa que raras veces tardaba mucho en producirse, a pesar de sus propósitos previos) —. Y cuando te casaste con Harriet, no veo cómo podías esperar que nuestras familias no dependieran la una de la otra. Si has cambiado de idea y quieres que los míos pierdan la posición que tienen, será mejor que lo digas. Yo no he cambiado nada: sigo siendo un simple feligrés como lo era antes de que aparecieran todas esas nuevas doctrinas. Acepto el mundo tal como lo encuentro, en el comercio y en lo demás. Me contento con no ser peor que mis vecinos. Pero si quieres que perdamos posición, dilo. Porque entonces sabré mejor qué es lo que tengo que hacer.

—Hablas de forma muy poco razonable. ¿Vas a perder posición si te falta esa carta para tu hijo?

—Tanto si la pierdo como si no, considero una grosería que te niegues a escribirla. Acciones como esa quizá puedan cubrirse con el manto de la religión, pero desde fuera recuerdan desagradablemente al perro del hortelano, que ni come ni deja comer. Daría lo mismo que calumniases a Fred: negarte a decir que tú no has puesto en marcha esa calumnia viene a ser casi lo mismo. Cosas como esas… ese espíritu tiránico, deseoso de hacer de obispo y de banquero en todas partes… eso es lo que da mala fama a un hombre.

—No insistas en pelearte conmigo, porque sería muy doloroso no solo para Harriet, sino también para mí —dijo el señor Bulstrode, con un poco más de vehemencia y palidez de lo normal.

—No quiero pelearme. Por mi propio interés, y quizá también por el tuyo, conviene que seamos amigos. No te guardo ningún rencor; no tengo peor opinión de ti que de otras personas. Un hombre que casi se mata de hambre, y que dedica tanto tiempo a rezar en familia, y todo lo demás, como tú haces, cree en su religión, sea la que sea: con el capital que tienes también podrías hacer buenos negocios maldiciendo y jurando… muchas personas lo hacen. Te gusta ser el que manda, eso no se puede negar; tienes que ser el primero en el paraíso, de lo contrario no lo pasarías muy bien. Pero eres el marido de mi hermana, y debemos estar unidos; y si conozco a Harriet, pensará que has tenido tú la culpa de que nos peleemos, porque te empeñas en colar un mosquito y te niegas a hacerle un favor a Fred. Y no tengo intención de decir que voy a poner buena cara. Lo considero una grosería.

El señor Vincy se puso en pie, empezó a abotonarse el abrigo y miró fijamente a su cuñado, dando a entender que esperaba una respuesta concluyente.

No era la primera vez que el señor Bulstrode había empezado reprendiendo al señor Vincy y había terminado contemplando una imagen muy poco satisfactoria de sí mismo en el espejo tosco y nada halagüeño con que la mente de su cuñado, el fabricante, reflejaba los matices en las luces y sombras de sus semejantes; y quizá esa experiencia debiera de haberle permitido prever cómo terminaría la escena. Pero una fuente de mucho caudal es generosa con sus aguas incluso durante las lluvias, cuando además de inútiles son peligrosas; y un abundante manantial de amonestaciones tiende a ser igualmente incontenible.

No entraba en las posibilidades del señor Bulstrode ceder inmediatamente como resultado de unas incómodas reflexiones. Antes de cambiar de dirección, necesitaba dar forma a sus motivos y lograr que estuvieran de acuerdo con sus normas habituales. Finalmente, dijo:

—Voy a reflexionar un poco, Vincy. Hablaré del asunto con Harriet. Probablemente te enviaré una carta.

—Muy bien. Lo antes que puedas, por favor. Espero que se haya arreglado todo cuando nos veamos mañana.

Capítulo XIV

Sigue a continuación la receta precisa
para la salsa de esa carne exquisita,
llamada ociosidad, que muchos
gustan de comer, y consideran sabrosa:
primero estar atento a los buenos bocados como un sabueso,
mezclar bien con tonterías, removerlas
con buen aceite de halagos, muy espeso,
y cubrir con mezquinas mentiras ególatras.
Sírvase caliente: los recipientes que se deben usar
para conservarla son zapatos de difuntos.[35]

La conferencia del señor Bulstrode con Harriet tuvo, al parecer, el efecto deseado por el señor Vincy, ya que a primera hora de la mañana llegó una carta con el testimonio solicitado. Fred se apresuró a llevársela al señor Featherstone.

El anciano caballero no se había levantado porque hacía frío y, como Fred no vio a Mary Garth en la sala de estar, subió la escalera inmediatamente y presentó la carta a Featherstone, quien, cómodamente sentado en la cama con ayuda de unas almohadas, era tan capaz como siempre de disfrutar con su desconfianza en los seres humanos y su habilidad para desalentarlos. El anciano se puso las gafas para leer la carta, y procedió a apretar los labios y a bajar las comisuras.

—«Dadas las circunstancias no rehusaré expresar mi convicción», ¡vaya, qué palabras tan escogidas utiliza ese individuo! Lo hace tan bien como un subastador, «de que tu hijo Frederic no ha obtenido adelanto alguno de dinero con la garantía de legados prometidos por el señor Featherstone», ¿prometidos?, ¿quién ha dicho que yo haya prometido? No prometo nada… Cambiaré el testamento todas las veces que me apetezca, «y de que, considerando la naturaleza de semejante procedimiento, no es razonable presumir que un joven juicioso e íntegro trate de hacerlo». ¡Ah!, pero el caballero no dice que tú seas un joven juicioso e íntegro, fíjate bien en eso, amiguito. «En cuanto a mi relación con cualquier rumor de esa naturaleza, manifiesto con toda claridad que no he hecho ninguna declaración en el sentido de que tu hijo haya conseguido dinero prestado utilizando como garantía cualquier tipo de bienes raíces que pudieran llegar a sus manos al desaparecer el señor Featherstone». ¡Válgame Dios!, «bienes raíces»… «llegar a sus manos»… ¡«desaparecer»! El abogado Standish no es nada comparado con él. No hablaría con más cuidado si fuese a pedir dinero prestado. Bien —al llegar aquí el señor Featherstone miró a Fred por encima de las gafas, mientras le devolvía la carta con gesto despreciativo—, no supondrás que creo cualquier cosa porque Bulstrode la escriba con palabras muy rebuscadas, ¿eh?

Fred se puso colorado.

—Usted pidió la carta, tío. En mi opinión las palabras de Bulstrode tienen por lo menos tanto valor como las de la persona que afirmó lo contrario.

—Exactamente el mismo. Nunca he dicho que creyera ni una cosa ni otra. ¿Y ahora qué es lo que esperas? —dijo el señor Featherstone bruscamente, sin quitarse las gafas, pero ocultando las manos bajo las sábanas.

—No espero nada, tío. —A Fred le costó mucho trabajo contenerse para no dar rienda suelta a su irritación—. He venido a traerle la carta. Me despediré si es eso lo que desea.

—Aún no, aún no. Toca la campanilla; quiero que venga esa chica.

Fue una criada quien acudió en respuesta a la campanilla.

—¡Dile a la señorita que venga! —exclamó el señor Featherstone con impaciencia—. ¿Por qué se ha marchado? —Volvió a hablar en el mismo tono cuando Mary apareció—: ¿Por qué no puedes quedarte aquí quieta hasta que yo te diga que te vayas? Quiero mi chaleco. Te dije que lo pusieras siempre sobre la cama.

Los ojos de Mary estaban enrojecidos, como si hubiese llorado. No cabía duda de que el señor Featherstone se hallaba de muy mal humor aquella mañana y, a pesar de la perspectiva de recibir un dinero que le hacía mucha falta, Fred habría preferido estar libre para volverse contra el viejo tirano y decirle que Mary Garth no tenía por qué dedicarse a bailarle el agua. Aunque se puso en pie al entrar ella en la habitación, Mary apenas se fijó en él y parecía con los nervios en tensión, temerosa de que el anciano le tirase algo. Pero en realidad Featherstone no disponía de otra arma que la palabra. Cuando fue a descolgar el chaleco de una percha, Fred se acercó a ella y le dijo:

—Permíteme.

—¡Déjala! Traélo tú, chica, y ponlo sobre la cama —dijo el enfermo—. Y ahora vete hasta que vuelva a llamarte —añadió, cuando tuvo el chaleco al alcance de la mano. Era normal en él aderezar su aprecio por una persona mostrándose muy desagradable con otra, y Mary se hallaba siempre a mano para proporcionarle el condimento. Cuando le visitaban sus consanguíneos la trataba mejor. El señor Featherstone sacó muy despacio un manojo de llaves del bolsillo del chaleco y con la misma lentitud acercó un cofrecillo de estaño que quedaba oculto por la ropa de la cama.

—Esperas que te dé una pequeña fortuna, ¿no es eso? —dijo, mirando por encima de las gafas y haciendo una pausa mientras abría el cofre.

—Nada de eso, tío. El otro día tuvo usted la amabilidad de hablarme de un regalo, de lo contrario no habría pensado en ello. —Pero Fred era optimista por naturaleza y se había imaginado una suma que bastaría para librarle de una preocupación muy concreta. Cuando Fred se endeudaba, siempre le parecía muy probable que algo (sin concretar qué) le permitiera pagar la cantidad en cuestión a su debido tiempo. Y ahora que el suceso providencial se hallaba al parecer muy cerca, resultaba absurdo pensar que el regalo no cubriera sus necesidades; tan absurdo como una fe que creyera en medio milagro por falta de firmeza para creer en el milagro entero.

Las manos del anciano, de venas muy marcadas, juguetearon con muchos billetes de banco uno a uno, para volverlos a dejar después, mientras Fred se echaba para atrás en la silla, temeroso de mostrar un interés excesivo. Estaba convencido de ser un auténtico caballero y no le gustaba adular a un anciano por su dinero. Finalmente, el señor Featherstone lo miró de nuevo por encima de los lentes y le ofreció un delgado fajo de billetes: Fred vio con toda claridad, mientras se abrían hacia él por un extremo, que se trataba únicamente de cinco. Los cogió y dijo:

—Le quedo muy agradecido, tío. —Y se dispuso a enrollarlos sin dar muestras de interesarse por su valor. Pero no era eso lo que quería el señor Featherstone, que lo miraba con fijeza.

—Vamos, vamos, ¿no crees que merece la pena contarlos? Coges el dinero como un lord; supongo que lo pierdes de la misma manera.

—Pensaba que a caballo regalado no hay que mirarle el diente. Pero lo contaré con mucho gusto.

Fred no se sintió tan satisfecho, sin embargo, después de haberlo hecho. Porque, cosa absurda, el dinero era menos de lo que su optimismo había decidido. ¿En qué consiste la idoneidad de las cosas, si no es en su adecuación a las esperanzas de quien las recibe? Al fallarle aquello, la irracionalidad y el ateísmo se abrían como un abismo bajo sus pies. Grande fue la desilusión de Fred al descubrir que solo tenía en su poder cinco billetes de veinte libras y que su educación universitaria no parecía servirle de mucha ayuda. Sin embargo, fue capaz de decir, con rápidos cambios en el color del rostro:

—Muy generoso por su parte, tío.

—Eso es lo que yo creo —dijo el señor Featherstone; luego cerró el cofre con llave y lo volvió a guardar; a continuación se quitó los lentes con mucha calma y acabó repitiendo, como si sus reflexiones lo hubieran convencido todavía más—: yo diría que es muy generoso.

—Tenga la seguridad de que le quedo muy agradecido —dijo Fred, que ya había tenido tiempo de recuperar su aire risueño.

—Así debería ser. Deseas causar una buena impresión en el mundo y me parece que Peter Featherstone es la única persona en quien puedes confiar. —Aquí los ojos del anciano brillaron con extraña satisfacción, tanto por saber que aquel elegante joven contaba con él, como por estar convencido de que demostraba ser más bien estúpido al hacerlo.

—Así es, en efecto: la cuna no me ha deparado espléndidas oportunidades. Pocos hombres encuentran más trabas que yo —dijo Fred, sintiéndose algo sorprendido ante su propia virtud, habida cuenta de la

severidad con que se le había tratado—. Resulta triste tener que montar un caballo sin resuello, mientras hombres que son peores jueces están en condiciones de tirar el dinero haciendo compras desastrosas.

—Bueno, ahora puedes comprarte un buen caballo de caza. Ochenta libras deben bastarte para eso, calculo yo, y te quedan veinte para salir de cualquier pequeño apuro en que te encuentres —dijo el señor Featherstone, riendo entre dientes de manera apenas perceptible.

—Es usted muy bondadoso, tío —dijo Fred, advirtiendo con claridad el contraste entre sus palabras y sus sentimientos.

—Bastante mejor que el bueno de Bulstrode, desde luego. No creo que saques mucho en limpio de sus especulaciones. Me parece, por lo que oigo, que tiene bien atado a tu padre, ¿no es cierto?

—Mi padre no me habla nunca de sus asuntos, tío.

—Bueno, en eso demuestra cierto sentido común. Pero hay otras personas que se enteran sin que él se lo diga. Tu padre nunca podrá dejarte gran cosa; lo más probable es que muera sin testamento (es el tipo de persona que suele hacer eso), por muy alcalde de Middlemarch que llegue a ser. Y no te tocará gran cosa si muere *ab intestato*, aunque seas el primogénito.

Fred pensó que el señor Featherstone nunca se había mostrado tan desagradable. También era cierto que nunca le había dado tanto dinero de una sola vez.

—¿Le parece bien que destruya la carta del señor Bulstrode, tío? —dijo Fred, alzándola como para tirarla al fuego.

—Sí, sí, no la quiero para nada. No tiene ningún valor para mí.

Fred llevó la carta hasta la chimenea y la atravesó con el atizador, poniendo mucha energía en aquel gesto. Deseaba marcharse del cuarto, pero le daba un poco de vergüenza, por él y también por su tío, salir corriendo nada más embolsarse el dinero. Pero en seguida apareció el administrador de la finca para hablar con su amo y Fred, con indecible alivio por su parte, fue despedido, aunque con la orden de volver muy pronto.

El muchacho no solo deseaba verse libre del anciano, sino también hablar con Mary Garth, que se hallaba ahora en su sitio habitual junto al fuego, con la costura entre las manos y un libro abierto en la mesita vecina. Sus párpados no estaban ya tan enrojecidos y había recuperado su habitual aire de aplomo.

—¿Tengo que subir? —dijo, levantándose a medias al entrar Fred.

—No; me ha despedido porque ha entrado Simmons a verlo.

Mary volvió a sentarse y reanudó su labor. No había duda de que lo trataba con más indiferencia que de ordinario: no sabía de su indignación en el piso de arriba, producida por el afecto.

—¿Puedo quedarme aquí un poco, Mary, o te resultaré demasiado aburrido?

—Siéntate, por favor —dijo Mary—; nunca me aburrirás tanto como el señor John Waule, que estuvo aquí ayer y se sentó sin pedirme permiso.

—¡Pobre chico! Creo que está enamorado de ti.

—No me consta. Y considero una de las cosas más aborrecibles de la vida de una muchacha que siempre se hagan cábalas sobre su habilidad para que surja el amor entre ella y cualquier hombre que la trate con amabilidad y hacia quien se sienta agradecida. Me parecería una vanidad absurda suponer que todas las personas que se me acercan están enamoradas de mí.

Mary no tenía intención de dejar traslucir sus sentimientos, pero a pesar de sí misma terminó de hablar con un temblor de irritación en la voz.

—¡Al demonio con John Waule! No era mi intención molestarte. No sabía que tuvieras razones para estarle agradecida. Me olvidaba de que si alguien apaga una vela por ti consideras que se te ha hecho un gran favor. —También Fred tenía su orgullo y no estaba dispuesto a mostrar que sabía cuál era la causa de aquella explosión de Mary.

—¡Pero si no estoy enfadada! Solo me irritan las costumbres mundanas. Me gusta que se me hable como si tuviera un poco de sentido común. A decir verdad, pienso a menudo que mi capacidad intelectual está por encima de las cosas que se me dicen, incluso cuando proceden de los labios de jóvenes caballeros que han estudiado en la universidad. —Mary había recuperado la calma y hablaba con una corriente subterránea de buen humor muy agradable de escuchar.

—No me importa lo mucho que te rías a mis expensas esta mañana —dijo Fred—; me pareció que estabas muy triste antes, cuando has subido al piso de arriba. Es una vergüenza que tengas que quedarte aquí para que te maltraten de esa manera.

—Llevo una vida bastante regalada… si me comparo con otras personas. He intentado ser maestra y no sirvo para eso: a mi imaginación le gusta demasiado vagabundear por su cuenta. Cualquier cosa es mejor que fingir que se hace lo que a uno le pagan por hacer, pero sin llegar nunca a poner el corazón. Todo lo de

aquí sé hacerlo tan bien como cualquiera; quizá mejor que otras… Rosy, por ejemplo. Aunque sea precisamente una de esas hermosas criaturas que los ogros mantienen prisioneras en los cuentos de hadas.

—¡Rosy! —exclamó Fred, con tono de profundo escepticismo fraternal.

—¡Vamos, Fred! —dijo Mary, poniendo mucho énfasis en las palabras—; no tienes derecho a mostrarte tan crítico.

—¿Te refieres a algo en particular… ahora mismo?

—No; me refiero a algo general… siempre.

—Que soy perezoso y manirroto, ¿no es eso? Bueno, no sirvo para pobre. No me habría portado mal si hubiese sido rico.

—Quieres decir que habrías cumplido con tu deber en ese estado al que Dios no ha tenido a bien llamarte —dijo Mary, riendo.

—Bueno, no podría cumplir con mis obligaciones si fuese clérigo, como tampoco tú, si fueras institutriz. En eso deberías mostrar un poco más de comprensión hacia mí, Mary.

—Nunca he dicho que debas ser clérigo. Hay otras ocupaciones. Lo que me parece muy mal es que no tomes una decisión y actúes en consecuencia.

—Podría hacerlo, si… —Fred se interrumpió y se puso en pie, apoyándose contra la repisa de la chimenea.

—¿Si estuvieras seguro de que no vas a tener dinero?

—No es eso lo que he dicho. Quieres pelearte conmigo. Es una lástima que te dejes guiar por lo que otras personas cuentan de mí.

—¡Cómo podría querer pelearme contigo! Sería como pelearme con todos mis libros nuevos —dijo Mary, alzando el volumen que estaba sobre la mesita—. Por muy malvado que puedas parecer a otras personas, para mí siempre serás bueno.

—Porque te prefiero a todo el mundo. Pero sé que tú me desprecias.

—Sí… un poco —dijo Mary, asintiendo con una sonrisa.

—Te gustaría que fuera un individuo maravilloso, que tuviera opiniones sabias acerca de todo.

—Sí, me gustaría. —Mary cosía muy deprisa y parecía tan dueña de la situación que resultaba irritante. Cuando una conversación ha tomado el camino que no queríamos, solo conseguimos adentramos más y más en el pantano de la torpeza. Eso fue lo que Fred Vincy sintió.

—Supongo que una mujer nunca se enamora de alguien que haya conocido toda la vida… que haya conocido desde que tiene uso de razón, como les sucede a los hombres con frecuencia. Es siempre algún desconocido quien despierta su interés.

—Déjame ver —replicó Mary, torciendo socarronamente las comisuras de los labios—; tengo que repasar mis experiencias. Está Julieta… Puede ser un ejemplo de lo que tú dices. Pero probablemente Ofelia conocía a Hamlet desde hacía mucho tiempo. Brenda Troll… había conocido a Mordaunt Merton desde que eran niños, aunque él parece haber sido un joven muy estimable. Minna, en cambio, se enamoró incluso más apasionadamente de Cleveland, que era forastero. Waverley era un desconocido para Flora MacIvor, pero también es cierto que no se enamoró de él. Y quedan Olivia y Sophia Primrose, y Corinne[36]; de ellas puede decirse que se enamoraron de desconocidos. En conjunto, mi experiencia no aclara demasiado el problema.

Mary miró con cierta picardía a Fred y aquella mirada lo conmovió profundamente, aunque los ojos no fueran más que ventanas transparentes, donde el deseo de observar se satisfacía entre risas. El joven Vincy era sin duda una persona afectuosa y al convertirse en hombre, pese a su educación universitaria —que sirvió para aumentar sus ambiciones de rango y posición económica—, se había ido enamorando de su antigua compañera de juegos.

—Cuando un hombre no es amado, no le sirve de nada decir que podría ser mejor persona… que podría hacer cualquier cosa… es decir, si tuviera la seguridad de ser correspondido.

—No le sirve de nada decir que podría ser mejor. Debería, podría, quizá, tal vez… son palabras despreciables.

—No veo que un hombre sirva para mucho a no ser que tenga una mujer que lo quiera de verdad.

—Yo creo que su bondad ha de existir desde antes para conseguir ese amor.

—Sabes que eso no es cierto, Mary. Las mujeres no quieren a los hombres por su bondad.

—Quizá no. Pero si los aman, nunca los consideran malos.

—Es injusto decir que soy malo.

—No he dicho nada de ti.

—Nunca serviré para nada, Mary, si no me dices que me quieres… si no prometes casarte conmigo… es decir, cuando esté en condiciones de casarme.

—Si te quisiera, no me casaría contigo; y desde luego no te prometería nunca casarme contigo.

—Creo que eso es una iniquidad, Mary. Si me quieres, debes prometer que te casarás conmigo.

—Muy al contrario: creo que sería una iniquidad casarme contigo aunque te quisiera.

—Te refieres a mi situación actual, sin medios para mantener a una esposa. Por supuesto, pero solo tengo veintitrés años.

—En eso último sí que vas a cambiar. Pero no estoy segura de que cambies en nada más. Mi padre dice que un hombre perezoso no debiera existir, y mucho menos casarse.

—Entonces, ¿tengo que volarme la tapa de los sesos?

—No; en términos generales creo que harías mejor aprobando tu examen. Le he oído decir al señor Farebrother que es increíblemente fácil.

—Todo eso está muy bien. A él cualquier cosa le resulta fácil. Y no es que la inteligencia tenga nada que ver con ello. Yo soy diez veces más inteligente que muchos de los que aprueban.

—¡Vaya! —dijo Mary, incapaz de reprimir sus inclinaciones sarcásticas—. Eso explica que existan vicarios como el señor Crowse. Se divide tu inteligencia entre diez, y el cociente (¡válgame Dios!) es suficiente para graduarse. Pero eso solo demuestra que eres diez veces más perezoso que los otros.

—Bueno, pero si aprobara, ¿querrías que entrara en la Iglesia?

—La cuestión no es lo que yo quiero que hagas. Tienes tu propia conciencia, imagino. Bueno, ahí llega el señor Lydgate. He de ir a decírselo al tío.

—Mary —dijo Fred, cogiéndole una mano mientras ella se levantaba—, si no me das alguna esperanza, iré a peor en lugar de a mejor.

—No voy a darte esperanzas —dijo Mary, ruborizándose—. A tu familia no le gustaría y a la mía tampoco. ¡Mi padre consideraría una vergüenza que aceptara a un hombre que ha contraído deudas y no quiere trabajar! —Fred se sintió herido y le soltó la mano. Mary fue hasta la puerta, pero al llegar allí se volvió y dijo—: Fred, siempre has sido muy bueno y muy generoso conmigo. No soy una persona desagradecida. Pero no vuelvas a hablarme nunca de esa manera.

—Muy bien —dijo Fred con voz malhumorada, recogiendo el sombrero y la fusta. Su tez mostraba manchas de color rosa pálido y de un blanco muy apagado. Como muchos jóvenes perezosos que no han aprobado sus exámenes, Fred estaba muy enamorado, ¡y de una chica fea que no tenía dinero! Pero con las tierras del señor Featherstone como fondo y el convencimiento de que, dijera Mary lo que dijese, no le era indiferente, su situación no le parecía del todo desesperada.

Al llegar a su casa, Fred dio cuatro de los billetes de veinte libras a su madre, pidiéndole que se los guardara.

—No quiero gastarme ese dinero, madre. Lo necesito para pagar una deuda. Así que ponlo lejos de mis manos.

—Que Dios te bendiga, hijo mío —dijo la señora Vincy, que sentía extraordinaria predilección tanto por su primogénito como por la más pequeña (una niña de seis años), a quienes otros consideraban sus peores hijos. Las madres no siempre se engañan en sus preferencias: son, al menos, el mejor juez sobre la hondura de los sentimientos filiales. Y Fred quería mucho a su madre. Quizá era también su afecto por otra persona lo que le llevaba a tomar precauciones para evitar el riesgo de gastarse las cien libras. Porque el acreedor a quien debía ciento sesenta había tomado otras precauciones más sólidas: estaba en posesión de un pagaré firmado por el padre de Mary.

Capítulo xv

Has dejado unos ojos negros, dices,
los azules no logran atraerte;
sin embargo hoy pareces más arrobado
de lo que te veíamos antaño.
¡Oh! Persigo al hada más hermosa
por nuevos lugares placenteros;
huellas aquí y ecos allá
me guían hacia mi tesoro:
¡Por fin se vuelve… juventud inmortal
labrada en forma humana,
tan lozana como la milenaria verdad de la luz de las estrellas…!
¡Naturaleza, la de los muchos nombres!

Un gran historiador, como él insistía en llamarse, que tuvo la dicha de morir hace ciento veinte años y ocupar, por tanto, su sitio entre los colosos bajo cuyas descomunales piernas camina nuestra activa pequeñez, se enorgullece de sus copiosas observaciones y digresiones, considerándolas la parte menos imitable de su obra, y en especial de los capítulos iniciales de los sucesivos libros de su historia, en los que parece traer un sillón al proscenio y charlar con nosotros con toda la vigorosa naturalidad de su extraordinario inglés. Pero Fielding[37] vivió cuando los días eran más largos (porque el tiempo, como el dinero, se mide por nuestras necesidades), cuando las tardes de verano se vivían muy despacio y cuando el reloj hacía tictac con lentitud en las noches de invierno. Nosotros, historiadores tardíos, no debemos demorarnos siguiendo su ejemplo; y si lo hiciéramos, es probable que nuestra charla fuese impaciente y de poca densidad, como si la pronunciáramos desde una silla plegable en medio de un gran bullicio. Yo, al menos, tengo tanto trabajo descifrando ciertos destinos humanos y viendo cómo se tejen y destejen, que toda la luz de que dispongo debe concentrarse sobre esa malla particular, sin dispersarse sobre ese tentador conjunto de cosas más importantes llamado universo.

En el momento presente he de lograr que quien se interese por Lydgate conozca a este nuevo habitante de Middlemarch mejor de lo que puedan conocerlo incluso aquellas personas que más se han relacionado con él desde su llegada a la ciudad. Porque sin duda todo el mundo debe admitir que se puede alabar a un hombre con exageración, envidiarlo, ridiculizarlo, considerarlo instrumento y objeto de amor, o al menos seleccionarlo como futuro marido, sin que por ello deje de ser prácticamente un desconocido… reconocible únicamente como conjunto de signos para las falsas suposiciones de sus vecinos. Existía, sin embargo, la impresión generalizada de que Lydgate no era por completo uno más entre los médicos rurales, y semejante impresión en Middlemarch en aquel momento significaba que se tenían puestas en él grandes esperanzas. Porque los médicos de cabecera de todo el mundo eran muy inteligentes y se daba por hecho lo inconmensurable de su destreza para el tratamiento de las enfermedades más caprichosas o crueles. La prueba de su inteligencia se situaba en el más alto nivel intuitivo y se basaba en la inconmovible fe de sus pacientes del sexo femenino, siendo totalmente inasequible a cualquier objeción, excepto en el sentido de que tales intuiciones se enfrentaban con otras igualmente firmes; todas las señoras que veían la verdad médica en Wrench y en «el tratamiento fortalecedor» consideraban a Toller y a su «tratamiento debilitador» como el infierno de la medicina. Porque los tiempos heroicos de las copiosas sangrías y de las ventosas no habían terminado aún, y todavía menos los tiempos de las teorías generalizadoras, cuando se denostaba a la

enfermedad en abstracto y se la trataba de acuerdo con ello y sin contemplaciones, como si, por ejemplo, se le diera el nombre de insurrección, en cuyo caso no habría que disparar con cartuchos de fogueo, sino hacer que brotara sangre de inmediato. Los fortalecedores y debilitadores eran todos ellos, en opinión de alguien, hombres «inteligentes», que es, en realidad, lo más que se puede decir de los talentos de cualquier ser vivo. Nadie había llegado tan lejos como para imaginar que el señor Lydgate igualara los conocimientos del doctor Sprague y el doctor Minchin, los dos doctores en medicina[38], únicos en condiciones de ofrecer alguna seguridad cuando el peligro era extremo, casos en que la más mínima esperanza valía una guinea. Sin embargo, repito, existía la impresión generalizada de que Lydgate era distinto de los otros profesionales de Middlemarch. Y eso era cierto. Lydgate no tenía más que veintisiete años, una edad en la que muchos hombres no son nada corrientes; una edad en la que muchos tienen esperanzas de lograr algo, en la que están decididos a evitar todos los peligros y creen que el dinero no les pondrá un bocado entre los dientes ni se les montará a horcajadas sobre la espalda, sino que, más bien, en el caso de tener alguna relación con él, será tan solo para que tire de su carroza.

Lydgate se quedó huérfano nada más terminar sus estudios secundarios en una importante institución privada. Su padre, militar, había hecho muy poco por asegurar el porvenir de sus tres hijos y, cuando Tertius solicitó cursar estudios de medicina, a sus tutores les pareció más fácil acceder a su petición colocándolo de aprendiz con un médico rural que poner objeciones en razón de la dignidad familiar. Era uno de esos escasos muchachos que tienen muy pronto una inclinación concreta y deciden que hay algo especial en la vida que les gustaría hacer y que no está relacionado con la ocupación de sus padres. La mayoría de los que sentimos interés por algún tema recordamos una mañana, o alguna hora nocturna, en la que nos subimos a un taburete más alto para alcanzar un volumen todavía inédito de la biblioteca familiar, o nos sentamos con la boca abierta para escuchar a alguien a quien nunca habíamos oído o, por simple ausencia de libros, empezamos a escuchar alguna voz interior, como principio reconocible de nuestro interés. Algo parecido le sucedió a Lydgate. Era un chico despierto y, cuando aún acalorado por el juego se sentaba en un rincón, al cabo de cinco minutos se hallaba completamente sumergido en cualquier tipo de libro que caía en sus manos: si se trataba de *Rasselas* o de *Gulliver*, tanto mejor, pero el diccionario de Bailey también servía, o la Biblia con todos los apócrifos. Algo tenía que leer cuando no estaba montado en su poni o corriendo y cazando, o escuchando hablar a las personas mayores. Todo aquello comenzó antes de que cumpliera los diez años; para entonces había leído *Chrysal, o las aventuras de una guinea*[39], que no era ni leche para bebés, ni cualquier mezcla de color blanco que se quiere hacer pasar por leche, y se le había ocurrido que los libros eran tonterías y la vida una estupidez. Sus estudios de segunda enseñanza no modificaron mucho aquella opinión, porque si bien sacó adelante sus clásicos y sus matemáticas, no llegó a brillar en ninguna de las dos cosas. Se decía de él que podría hacer lo que quisiera, pero lo cierto era que aún no le había apetecido emprender nada notable. Era un animal vigoroso con una inteligencia despierta, pero todavía sin la chispa que habría de encender la pasión del entendimiento; el saber le parecía un asunto muy superficial, fácilmente superable; a juzgar por las conversaciones de sus mayores, había almacenado ya más de lo necesario para la vida adulta. Probablemente algo parecido les sucedía con frecuencia a otros alumnos de los centros de enseñanza más caros del país durante aquel período de chaquetas con talle alto y otras modas que no se han repetido aún. Pero en el transcurso de unas vacaciones, un día de lluvia le obligó —una vez más— a ir a la pequeña biblioteca de su hogar en busca de un libro que pudiera ofrecerle algo nuevo: ¡todo en vano! A no ser, claro está, que echara mano de una polvorienta hilera de grises volúmenes en rústica con rótulos manchados: los tomos de una antigua enciclopedia que Tertius nunca había manejado. Sacarlos de su sitio ya sería por lo menos una novedad. Estaban en la estantería más alta y tuvo que subirse a una silla para alcanzarlos. Pero abrió el primer volumen que cogió; por alguna razón se tiende a leer en posturas provisionales precisamente cuando parece más inconveniente hacerlo. La página que abrió era de anatomía y el primer párrafo que atrajo su mirada describía las válvulas del corazón. Tertius no estaba muy familiarizado con válvulas de ningún tipo, pero sabía que *valvae* eran puertas plegables y por aquella fisura entró una luz repentina que le proporcionó con gran claridad la primera imagen de un mecanismo de gran precisión en el interior del cuerpo humano. Su educación liberal le había permitido, por supuesto, leer los pasajes inmorales en los clásicos consagrados por la tradición, pero, aparte de un sentimiento generalizado de secreto y de obscenidad en conexión con la estructura interna de su cuerpo, le había dejado la cabeza en un estado de completa neutralidad, de manera que, por lo que a él se le alcanzaba, el cerebro descansaba en pequeñas bolsas en las sienes y no se hacía más idea de la circulación de la sangre que de cómo el papel moneda sustituía al oro. Pero el momento de la vocación había llegado y, antes de que se bajara de la silla, el mundo quedó renovado para él mediante un presentimiento de inacabables procesos que llenarían los vastos espacios hasta entonces ocultos a su vista por la ignorancia

verbosa que había confundido con el saber. Desde aquella hora Lydgate sintió cómo crecía en su interior una pasión intelectual.

No nos asusta contar una y otra vez cómo un hombre llega a enamorarse de una mujer y a casarse o, por el contrario, a verse fatalmente separado de ella. ¿Se debe a un exceso de poesía o de estupidez el que nunca nos cansemos de describir lo que el rey Jacobo llamó «la compostura y la belleza» de una mujer ni de escuchar el trémolo de las cuerdas del viejo trovador y nos mostremos en cambio comparativamente indiferentes a ese otro tipo de «compostura y belleza» que ha de cortejarse con trabajo intelectual perseverante y renuncia paciente a los pequeños deseos? También varía el desarrollo en la historia de esa pasión: unas veces se alcanza el matrimonio deseado y otras solo el desencanto y la separación final. Y con frecuencia el fracaso está ligado a la otra pasión, cantada por los trovadores. Porque entre la multitud de hombres de mediana edad que atienden a su vocación de acuerdo con una pauta diaria tan invariable como el modo de hacerse el nudo de la corbata, hay siempre un buen número de personas que en algún momento quisieron dar forma a sus propias acciones y cambiar un poco el mundo. La historia de cómo llegaron a moderarse de acuerdo con el común rasero hasta dejarse empaquetar por gruesas, casi nunca se cuenta; ni siquiera se la cuentan ellos, porque quizá su entusiasmo por un trabajo generoso y sin recompensa se ha ido enfriando de forma tan imperceptible como se enfría el ardor de otros amores juveniles, hasta que un día su antigua personalidad recorrió como un fantasma el nuevo hogar, dando una tonalidad espectral a la nueva decoración. ¡No hay en el mundo nada tan sutil como el proceso de ese cambio gradual! Al principio lo inhalan sin darse cuenta; los demás podemos contribuir con nuestro aliento a infectarlos, cuando repetimos nuestras falsedades conformistas o sacamos nuestras estúpidas conclusiones; o quizá les haya llegado con las vibraciones de una mirada de mujer.

Lydgate no tenía intención de ser uno de esos fracasados y sus esperanzas eran más sólidas porque su interés científico adoptó muy pronto la forma de entusiasmo profesional: poseía una fe juvenil en el trabajo con que se ganaba la vida, fe que no se vio ahogada por esa iniciación a la provisionalidad que fueron sus días de aprendizaje; y a sus estudios en Londres, en Edimburgo y en París llevó el convencimiento de que la profesión médica, tal como debía ser, era la mejor del mundo, por presentar la más perfecta interdependencia entre ciencia y arte, y por ofrecer la más directa colaboración entre las conquistas intelectuales y el bienestar social. La personalidad de Lydgate exigía aquella combinación: era una persona emotiva, con un sentido muy de carne y hueso de la fraternidad humana, capaz de resistir todas las abstracciones de unos estudios especializados. No le interesaban solo los «casos», sino John y Elizabeth, especialmente Elizabeth.

Su profesión tenía otro atractivo para él: estaba necesitada de reformas y le daba a uno la oportunidad de decidirse, lleno de justa indignación, a rechazar sus venales distinciones honoríficas y otras patrañas, y a poseer un saber genuino aunque no estuviera refrendado por ningún título. Lydgate fue a estudiar a París dispuesto a instalarse a la vuelta como médico general en alguna ciudad de provincias y a evitar la irracional separación entre ciencia médica y quirúrgica en beneficio de sus propios intereses científicos y del general progreso de la medicina; se mantendría alejado de las intrigas, de los celos y de la adulación social practicada en Londres y se haría célebre, aunque tardara mucho, gracias al auténtico valor de su trabajo, tal como sucediera con Jenner[40]. Porque debe recordarse que era aquel un período sombrío y, a pesar de las venerables instituciones[41] que se esforzaban por garantizar la pureza de los conocimientos difundiéndolos lo menos posible, y por excluir el error mediante un rígido control en lo relativo a honorarios y nombramientos, sucedía que jóvenes caballeros muy ignorantes conseguían puestos de responsabilidad en las ciudades y muchos más lograban la autorización para practicar la medicina en amplias zonas del país. De la misma manera, el elevado prestigio de que gozaba ante la opinión pública el Colegio de Médicos, el cual daba su peculiar sanción a la formación —muy cara y muy esotérica— obtenida por los graduados de Oxford y Cambridge, no impedía que también prosperara el curanderismo; porque, como la práctica profesional consistía fundamentalmente en suministrar gran número de medicinas, los pacientes llegaban a la conclusión de que aún estarían mejor con más medicinas, con tal de poder conseguirlas a un precio módico, y de aquí que ingirieran grandes cantidades de remedios recetados por ignorantes sin escrúpulos, carentes de todo título. Considerando que las estadísticas no habían calculado aún el número de médicos ignorantes o hipócritas que inevitablemente han de existir a pesar de todos los cambios, a Lydgate le parecía que la transformación de cada una de las unidades era el modo más directo de modificar la cifra total. Quería ser una unidad que supusiera cierta diferencia en la dirección del cambio que se iba produciendo y que un día llegaría a notarse en los porcentajes; esperaba al mismo tiempo tener el placer de que sus cuidados profesionales significaran una ventajosa diferencia para las vísceras de sus pacientes. Pero Lydgate no se proponía tan solo un ejercicio de la medicina más auténtico de lo habitual. Su

ambición era más amplia: soñaba con poder hallar la prueba de una nueva concepción anatómica y añadir así un eslabón a la cadena de los descubrimientos.

¿A alguien le parece ilógico que un médico de Middlemarch se imaginara descubridor? La mayoría de nosotros, por supuesto, sabemos poco de los grandes creadores hasta que se los coloca entre las estrellas y empiezan a dirigir nuestro destino. Pero aquel Herschel[42], por ejemplo, que «rompió la barrera de los cielos», ¿no es cierto que en determinada época tocó el órgano de una iglesia provinciana y dio lecciones de música a pianistas balbuceantes? Cada una de esas brillantes luminarias tuvo que caminar sobre la tierra entre vecinos que quizá se fijaban mucho más en su manera de andar y en la ropa que llevaba que en lo que iba a darle derecho a una fama duradera; cada uno de ellos tuvo su pequeña historia personal, salpicada de pequeñas tentaciones y de preocupaciones sórdidas, responsables de las fricciones dilatorias en su marcha hacia la hermandad definitiva con los inmortales. Lydgate no era ciego a los peligros de esa fricción, pero tenía plena confianza en su voluntad de evitarla hasta donde fuera posible: a sus veintisiete años se consideraba una persona con experiencia. Como tampoco permitiría que se despertara su vanidad al contacto con los frívolos personajes que tenían éxito en Londres, sino que viviría entre gentes que no podrían competir con la búsqueda de una gran idea, búsqueda que sería la meta de su vida junto con la práctica asidua de su profesión. La esperanza de que ambos objetivos se iluminaran mutuamente resultaba fascinante: la observación y deducción cuidadosas que constituían su trabajo diario, el uso del microscopio para apoyar su juicio en casos especiales, contribuirían a hacer de su cerebro un instrumento para pesquisas más amplias. ¿No era esa la preeminencia característica de su profesión? Sería un buen médico de Middlemarch y con ello se mantendría en el camino de una investigación de largo alcance. En este particular estadio de su carrera hay un punto en el que sería de justicia elogiarlo: Lydgate no se proponía en absoluto imitar a esos filántropos modélicos que venden pepinillos envenenados para ganarse la vida mientras denuncian adulteraciones alimentarias o tienen participación en un garito de juego para disponer del suficiente tiempo libre con que defender la causa de la moralidad pública. La intención de Lydgate era iniciar por sí mismo ciertas reformas que estaban perfectamente a su alcance y que resultaban mucho menos problemáticas que la demostración de una teoría anatómica. Una de esas reformas era actuar con firmeza, aprovechando el respaldo de una reciente decisión legal[43], y limitarse a recetar, sin administrar medicamentos ni aceptar un tanto por ciento de los farmacéuticos. Esto constituía una innovación para quien había elegido adoptar el estilo de médico general de una ciudad provinciana, innovación que sería considerada sin duda por sus colegas como una crítica ofensiva. Pero Lydgate también tenía intención de innovar en sus tratamientos y poseía la prudencia suficiente para ver que la mejor garantía para practicar la medicina honradamente de acuerdo con sus creencias era librarse de las tentaciones sistemáticas en sentido contrario.

Quizá era aquella una época más propicia que la presente para observadores e inventores de teorías; tendemos a considerar la mejor época del mundo aquella en que América empezaba a ser descubierta, cuando un marino audaz, aunque terminara naufragando, podía ir a dar con sus huesos en un nuevo reino; y hacia 1829 los oscuros territorios de la patología eran una maravillosa América para un joven aventurero animoso. Lydgate ambicionaba sobre todo contribuir a la ampliación de la base científica y racional de su profesión. Cuanto más se interesaba por los problemas específicos de las enfermedades, como la naturaleza de la fiebre o de las fiebres, más vivamente sentía la necesidad de alcanzar ese conocimiento fundamental de las estructuras que, precisamente a comienzos de siglo, habían sido iluminadas por la breve y gloriosa carrera de Bichat[44], muerto cuando solo tenía treinta y un años, pero que, como otro Alejandro Magno, había dejado un reino muy amplio donde cabían muchos herederos. Aquel gran francés defendió por primera vez la concepción de que los cuerpos vivos, básicamente considerados, no son asociaciones de órganos que puedan entenderse estudiándolos primero por separado y luego, por así decirlo, confederadamente; sino que han de verse como compuestos de ciertas mallas o tejidos primigenios, de los cuales están formados los distintos órganos —cerebro, corazón, pulmones, etc.—, al igual que los diferentes aposentos de una casa se construyen con diversas proporciones de madera, hierro, piedra, ladrillos, zinc y todo lo demás, cada material con su peculiar composición y proporciones. Ningún hombre, se comprende en seguida, puede entender y valorar la estructura total o sus partes —sus debilidades y sus puntos sólidos — sin conocer la naturaleza de los materiales. Y la concepción elaborada por Bichat, con su estudio detallado de los diferentes tejidos, tuvo inevitablemente un efecto sobre los problemas médicos parecido al de encender una luz de gas en una calle de ordinario débilmente iluminada con lámparas de aceite: mostró conexiones nuevas y datos estructurales, hasta entonces ocultos, que deben tenerse en cuenta al considerar los síntomas de las enfermedades y la acción de los medicamentos. Pero los resultados que dependen de la conciencia y de la inteligencia humanas avanzan con lentitud y, para finales de 1829, la mayor parte de la

práctica médica seguía pavoneándose o arrastrando los pies por las viejas sendas y quedaba aún por hacer una tarea científica que pudiera considerarse consecuencia directa de la de Bichat. Aquel gran profeta no fue más allá de la consideración de los tejidos como realidad última del organismo vivo, marcando los límites del análisis anatómico; pero quedaba abierta a otra mente la posibilidad de decir: ¿no tienen estas estructuras una base común de la que todas han surgido, como zangala, gasa, tul, satén y terciopelo provienen del capullo sin elaborar? Aquí se produciría una nueva luz, como de gas oxhídrico, que mostraría la textura misma de las cosas y permitiría revisar todas las explicaciones anteriores. Lydgate estaba enamorado de aquella prolongación de la obra de Bichat, que ya vibraba en muchas corrientes del pensamiento europeo; él anhelaba poner al descubierto las más íntimas relaciones de la estructura viva y ayudar a definir con más precisión el pensamiento humano según un orden verdadero. El trabajo no estaba aún hecho, tan solo preparado para quienes supieran usar aquella preparación. ¿Qué era el tejido primitivo? Así se planteaba Lydgate el problema: no del todo de la forma requerida para alcanzar la respuesta que terminaría recibiendo; pero no hallar la palabra adecuada es algo que les sucede a muchos buscadores. Y él contaba con tranquilos intervalos que aprovecharía con diligencia para recoger los hilos de la investigación; contaba con muchos indicios que fructificarían con aplicación perseverante, no solo en el uso del escalpelo, sino del microscopio, instrumento que los investigadores habían empezado a usar otra vez con el renovado entusiasmo que produce la seguridad. Tal era el plan de Lydgate para el futuro: hacer un buen trabajo de proporciones modestas para Middlemarch y una gran obra para el mundo.

El joven médico era sin duda un hombre feliz en aquellos momentos: tenía veintisiete años, ningún vicio asentado, la generosa decisión de que sus actos fueran caritativos, e ideas en el cerebro que hacían la vida interesante, prescindiendo por completo del culto a la carne de caballo y otros ritos místicos de costosa observancia que las ochocientas libras que le habían quedado después de los gastos para establecerse apenas servirían para empezar a pagar. Lydgate se hallaba en ese punto de partida que convierte las carreras de muchos hombres en un excelente pretexto para hacer apuestas, si es que existía algún caballero aficionado a esa diversión capaz de apreciar las complicadas probabilidades de un propósito arduo, con todos los obstáculos y apoyos posibles añadidos por las circunstancias y con todos los matices del equilibrio interior, por medio de los cuales un hombre nada y alcanza su meta o, por el contrario, se ve arrastrado por la corriente. La incertidumbre seguiría existiendo, incluso conociendo íntimamente el carácter de Lydgate, porque también el carácter es un proceso y un desarrollo. El hombre estaba aún haciéndose en su doble faceta de médico de Middlemarch y de descubridor destinado a la inmortalidad, y había en Lydgate virtudes y faltas capaces de menguar o de crecer. Espero que sus faltas no sean motivo para que desaparezca nuestro interés por él. ¿Acaso no existe, entre los amigos que valoramos, alguno que es un poco desdeñoso y tiene demasiada confianza en sí mismo, cuya inteligencia preclara se halla un tanto contaminada de vulgaridad; que está un poco encogido aquí y un poco hinchado allá por prejuicios locales; o cuyas mejores energías son susceptibles de perderse por un canal equivocado bajo la influencia de tentaciones pasajeras? Todas estas cosas podrían alegarse contra Lydgate, pero, a decir verdad, no son más que las perífrasis de un cortés predicador que hablase de Adán y no quisiera mencionar nada doloroso para los fieles que ocupan los bancos de la iglesia. Las faltas particulares de donde se han destilado estas delicadas generalidades tienen fisonomía, dicción, acento y gestos perfectamente reconocibles que interpretan papeles en muchos dramas distintos. Nuestras vanidades se diferencian tanto como nuestras narices: ningún engreimiento es el mismo engreimiento, sino que varía en correspondencia con las minucias de la estructura mental en las que cada uno de nosotros difiere de los demás. La vanidad de Lydgate era del tipo arrogante, nunca bobalicona, nunca impertinente, pero sólida en sus exigencias y benevolentemente despreciativa. El joven médico haría mucho por los mentecatos, compadeciéndose de ellos y creyéndose muy seguro de que no tenían el menor poder sobre él; cuando vivía en París pensó en afiliarse a los sansimonianos, para volverlos en contra de algunas de sus propias doctrinas. Todas sus faltas estaban marcadas por rasgos afines y eran las de un hombre con una agradable voz de barítono, a quien le sentaba bien la ropa y que incluso en sus gestos más ordinarios tenía un aire de distinción innata. ¿Dónde, entonces, podían reconocerse las manchas de vulgaridad?, dice una señorita enamorada de esa descuidada elegancia. ¿Cómo podía existir vulgaridad en un hombre tan bien educado, de ambiciones tan nobles, tan generoso y fuera de lo corriente en sus ideas sobre el deber social? Con la misma facilidad con que puede darse la estupidez en un hombre de genio si se le sorprende de improviso en un tema que no domina, o como muchos hombres, que tienen la mejor voluntad para alcanzar la felicidad y prosperidad sociales, pueden mostrarse poco inspirados a la hora de buscar distracciones, incapaces de ir más allá de la música de Offenbach o de los brillantes chistes del último espectáculo satírico. Las manchas de vulgaridad de Lydgate tenían que ver con la naturaleza de sus prejuicios, que, a pesar de sus nobles intenciones y de su capacidad de comprensión, eran (la mitad de ellos)

los mismos que se encuentran en cualquier otro hombre de mundo: la brillantez ligada a su entusiasmo intelectual no influía en sus sentimientos y juicios sobre muebles, sobre mujeres o sobre la conveniencia de que se supiera (sin decirlo él) que procedía de mejor cuna que otros médicos de provincias. Lydgate, de momento, no tenía intención de pensar en muebles; pero cuando lo hiciera, era de temer que ni la biología ni los planes de reforma fuesen capaces de elevarlo sobre la vulgaridad de creer que para un hombre de su posición eran imprescindibles unos muebles de la mejor calidad.

En cuanto a las mujeres, se había visto ya arrastrado en una ocasión por un pasajero ataque de locura, que él estaba decidido a que fuese el último, ya que, en un futuro lejano, el matrimonio no tendría, por supuesto, nada de impetuoso. Para aquellos que quieran conocer bien a Lydgate será conveniente saber en qué consistió este caso de locura pasajera, porque puede presentarse como ejemplo de los caprichosos virajes de la pasión a los que se hallaba inclinado, junto con la caballerosa amabilidad que contribuía a hacer de él un personaje que inspiraba cariño. La historia se cuenta en pocas palabras. Sucedió cuando estudiaba en París y precisamente en el momento en que, además de sus otras tareas, realizaba algunos experimentos sobre galvanismo. Una tarde, cansado de sus trabajos, incapaz de producir los fenómenos que necesitaba, concedió a sus ranas y conejos un relativo reposo en la molesta y misteriosa aplicación de inexplicadas descargas eléctricas y fue a terminar la velada en el teatro de la Porte St Martin, donde se representaba un melodrama que ya había presenciado varias veces, atraído no por el ingenioso trabajo en colaboración de los autores, sino por una actriz cuyo papel consistía en apuñalar a su amante, confundiéndolo con un duque malvado. Lydgate estaba enamorado de la actriz, de la forma en que un hombre se enamora de una mujer a la que nunca espera conocer. Madame Laure era una provenzal de ojos oscuros, perfil griego y figura majestuosa, dueña de esa clase de belleza que lleva consigo un dulce aire maternal incluso en la primera juventud, y su voz era un suave arrullo. Había llegado recientemente a París y tenía reputación de mujer virtuosa, ya que su marido era quien representaba el papel de infortunado amante. En cuanto a la calidad de su interpretación, «no era mejor de lo que tendría que ser», pero el público se daba por satisfecho. La única distracción de Lydgate consistía en contemplar a aquella mujer igual que habría podido tumbarse durante un rato en un bancal de violetas bajo el aliento del suave viento del sur, sin perjuicio para sus trabajos sobre el galvanismo, a los que volvería en seguida. Pero aquella noche se produjo en el viejo drama una catástrofe nueva. En el momento en que la heroína debía fingir que apuñalaba a su amante y este caer con elegancia, la esposa clavó de verdad la daga en el pecho del marido, que se derrumbó con la autenticidad de la muerte misma. Un alarido estremeció el teatro y la provenzal se desmayó: la obra exigía alarido y desmayo, pero esta vez el desvanecimiento también era real. Lydgate saltó y trepó, no sabría decir cómo, hasta el escenario y ayudó activamente; descubrir una contusión en la cabeza de la actriz y alzarla del suelo tomándola en brazos le dieron la ocasión de conocerla personalmente. París se conmovió con la historia de aquella muerte: ¿se trataba de un asesinato? Algunos de los más entusiastas admiradores de la actriz se inclinaban a creer en su culpabilidad y les gustaba aún más por ello (tales eran los gustos de la época); pero Lydgate no era uno de esos. Defendía con ardor su inocencia y la distante pasión anónima que había sentido por su belleza se convirtió en devoción personal y tierna preocupación por la suerte que la esperaba. La idea del asesinato era absurda; no existía móvil alguno, ya que era bien conocido el mutuo cariño de los cónyuges; y no sería la primera vez que un paso en falso involuntario hubiese tenido graves consecuencias. Las investigaciones de la justicia terminaron con la puesta en libertad de madame Laure. Para entonces Lydgate había conversado muchas veces con ella y la encontraba cada vez más adorable. La provenzal hablaba poco, pero eso solo suponía un encanto adicional. Se mostraba melancólica y parecía agradecida; a él le bastaba con su presencia, como le sucedía con la luz del atardecer. Por otra parte deseaba locamente su afecto y sentía unos celos terribles al pensar que otro hombre pudiera lograrlo y pedirle que se casara con él. Pero en lugar de reanudar las representaciones en la Porte St Martin, donde su popularidad se hubiera acrecentado a causa del fatal episodio, madame Laure se ausentó de París sin previo aviso, abandonando su pequeña corte de admiradores. Quizá nadie perseveró tanto en su búsqueda como Lydgate, que sintió que toda la ciencia había llegado a detenerse mientras él se imaginaba a la infeliz Laure, herida por un pesar sin límites, convertida en vagabunda, sin encontrar consuelo en ningún sitio. Las actrices que se esconden, sin embargo, no son tan difíciles de encontrar como otros hechos ocultos, y Lydgate no tardó en reunir indicios suficientes de que Laure había tomado el camino de Lyon. Finalmente la encontró trabajando con gran éxito en Avignon, con el mismo nombre, con aspecto aún más majestuoso y representando el papel de esposa abandonada con un hijo en brazos. Lydgate habló con ella después de la función y fue recibido con la calma habitual, que a él le parecía tan hermosa como la transparente profundidad del agua, y obtuvo permiso para visitarla al día siguiente, momento en el que estaba decidido a decirle que la adoraba y a pedirle que fuera su esposa. Sabía que aquello era como el

impulso repentino de un loco, en desacuerdo incluso con sus flaquezas habituales. ¡No importaba! Era lo que estaba decidido a hacer. Por lo visto había en su interior dos personas distintas y ambas tenían que aprender a convivir y a soportar sus respectivos defectos. Algunos de nosotros, extrañamente, con rápida visión alternativa, divisamos lo que queda más allá de nuestras locuras amorosas e, incluso, mientras aún desvariamos en las alturas, contemplamos las vastas llanuras donde nuestro yo más estable hace una pausa y nos espera.

Acercarse a Laure con una petición que no fuese tiernamente reverencial habría supuesto, simplemente, obrar en contra de sus sentimientos.

—¿Ha venido usted nada menos que desde París en mi busca? —le dijo ella al día siguiente, cruzada de brazos en la silla y mirándolo con ojos que parecían expresar todo el asombro de un animal salvaje—. ¿Son así todos los ingleses?

—He venido porque no podía vivir sin verla. Está usted sola; yo la quiero; deseo que acepte ser mi esposa: esperaré, pero quiero que prometa que se casará conmigo… y con nadie más.

Laure lo miró en silencio con un brillo melancólico en sus espléndidos ojos, hasta que Lydgate se sintió lleno de extasiada certeza y fue a arrodillarse a su lado.

—Tengo algo que contarle —dijo ella, con su voz melodiosa, manteniendo los brazos cruzados—. Es verdad que me resbalé.

—Lo sé, lo sé —dijo Lydgate, quitándole importancia—. Fue un terrible accidente… un despiadado golpe de la fatalidad que me ligó aún más a usted.

Laure hizo otra breve pausa, y luego añadió, lentamente:

—Tenía intención de hacerlo.

Lydgate, aunque era un hombre fuerte, se puso pálido y empezó a temblar: pasó algún tiempo antes de que se levantara y se situase a cierta distancia de ella.

—Existía algún secreto, entonces —dijo por fin, con vehemencia incluso—. La trataba brutalmente; usted lo odiaba.

—¡No! Resultaba fatigoso; me quería demasiado; se empeñaba en vivir en París y no en mi tierra; eso no me gustaba.

—¡Cielo santo! —dijo Lydgate, con un gemido de horror—. ¿Y planeó usted asesinarlo?

—No lo planeé: se me ocurrió durante la representación… pero tenía intención de hacerlo.

Lydgate enmudeció y, sin darse cuenta, aplastó el sombrero mientras la contemplaba. Vio a aquella mujer —la primera depositaria de su juvenil adoración— entre la caterva de los delincuentes estúpidos.

—Usted es una buena persona —dijo ella—. Pero no me gustan los maridos. Nunca volveré a casarme.

Tres días después Lydgate realizaba de nuevo en París sus experimentos con corrientes galvánicas, convencido de que para él se habían terminado las ilusiones. Las reservas de afecto que aún había en su corazón y su fe en las posibilidades de mejorar la vida humana impidieron que aquella experiencia lo endureciera. Pero ahora que había pasado por aquello, tenía más razones que nunca para fiarse de su propio juicio y, por consiguiente, su actitud con las mujeres iba a ser estrictamente científica, sin esperar más de lo que estuviera justificado.

No era probable que nadie tuviera en Middlemarch una idea de Lydgate como la que aquí ha sido levemente esbozada y, de hecho, los respetables habitantes de aquella ciudad provinciana no eran más propensos que los seres humanos en general a hacer grandes esfuerzos para representarse con exactitud lo que no perciben con sus propios sentidos. No solo las doncellas de la ciudad; también hombres de barba canosa hacían a menudo conjeturas sobre cómo una persona recién conocida podría encajar en la realización de sus planes, contentándose con un conocimiento muy superficial de los modos en que la vida había ido moldeándola para esa función. Middlemarch, de hecho, contaba con tragarse a Lydgate y llegar a asimilarlo sin trastornos de ninguna clase.

Capítulo XVI

Todo lo que se adora en la mujer
lo encuentro en tu bella persona…
porque el sexo femenino solo se puede permitir
hermosura y amabilidad.

SIR CHARLES SEDLEY

La cuestión de si el señor Tyke debía ser nombrado capellán con sueldo en el hospital era un apasionante tema de conversación para los habitantes de Middlemarch; y Lydgate lo oyó discutir de una manera que arrojaba mucha luz sobre el poder que el señor Bulstrode tenía en la ciudad. El banquero era sin duda un dirigente de gran importancia, pero existía una oposición, e incluso entre sus partidarios había algunos que no tenían inconveniente en dejar ver que su apoyo era consecuencia de un compromiso y que manifestaban con franqueza cómo la organización de las cosas en general, y en especial las contingencias del comercio, exigían tener una vela encendida al diablo.

El poder del señor Bulstrode no se debía simplemente a su condición de banquero provinciano que conoce los secretos financieros de la mayor parte de los comerciantes de la ciudad y controla las fuentes de su crédito; se hallaba reforzado por determinados actos de beneficencia que eran al mismo tiempo eficaces y severos: eficaces para crear obligaciones y severos en la estricta vigilancia sobre sus resultados. Bulstrode había conseguido, como hombre trabajador siempre en su puesto, un lugar muy importante en la administración de las obras benéficas de la ciudad, y sus caridades privadas eran de poca cuantía pero numerosas. Nuestro banquero se ocupaba de colocar como aprendiz a Tegg, el hijo del zapatero, y también controlaba si Tegg iba a la iglesia; defendía a la señora Strype, la lavandera, contra el alquiler excesivo que Stubbs le cobraba por el sitio para secar la ropa y también sometía a examen minucioso una calumnia contra la señora Strype. Sus préstamos privados de poca importancia eran muchos, pero se informaba con detenimiento de las circunstancias de los beneficiarios tanto antes como después del préstamo. De esa manera cualquier persona consigue, además de gratitud, un dominio sobre las esperanzas y los temores de sus convecinos; y el poder, una vez que ha alcanzado esa zona tan difícil de delimitar, se propaga solo, extendiéndose sin relación alguna con sus medios externos. Uno de los principios básicos del señor Bulstrode era acumular todo el poder posible, con el fin de usarlo para la gloria de Dios, y había tenido que superar abundantes conflictos espirituales y discusiones consigo mismo para rectificar sus motivos y dejar claro ante su conciencia lo que la gloria de Dios requería. Pero, como ya hemos visto, sus motivos no siempre eran correctamente apreciados. Había muchos espíritus torpes en Middlemarch cuyas balanzas reflexivas solo podían sopesar las cosas en bruto; y tenían la terrible sospecha de que el señor Bulstrode, al no disfrutar de la vida como ellos, ya que comía y bebía demasiado poco y se preocupaba en cambio por todo, encontraba un placer vampírico en su sentimiento de dominio.

El asunto de la capellanía surgió en la mesa del señor Vincy cuando Lydgate estaba cenando allí, y el joven médico pudo observar que los lazos de parentesco con el señor Bulstrode no eran óbice para cierta libertad en los comentarios, incluso por parte del anfitrión, aunque sus razones contra el arreglo propuesto descansaran enteramente en sus objeciones a los sermones del señor Tyke, muy doctrinarios, y en su preferencia por el señor Farebrother, cuyas intervenciones desde el púlpito se hallaban libres de ese reproche. Al señor Vincy no le parecía mal la idea de que un capellán tuviera un sueldo, siempre que se le diera a Farebrother, que era un hombrecillo tan bueno como el mejor, excelente predicador y muy sociable

por añadidura.

—¿Qué actitud tomará usted en ese caso? —preguntó el señor Chichely, el *coroner*[45], frecuente compañero de caza del señor Vincy.

—Estoy contentísimo de no ser ya uno de los directores. Votaré para que el asunto lo solucionen ellos y el consejo médico de consuno. Voy a colocar parte de mi responsabilidad sobre sus hombros, doctor —dijo el señor Vincy, mirando primero al doctor Sprague, el médico más antiguo de la ciudad, y después a Lydgate, que estaba sentado enfrente—. Ustedes, los profesionales, tendrán que deliberar sobre qué tipo de purga van a prescribir, ¿eh, señor Lydgate?

—Sé muy poco de los dos —respondió Lydgate—, pero, en general, los nombramientos tienden en exceso a convertirse en una cuestión de simpatías personales. El hombre más apto para un determinado cargo no es siempre ni la mejor persona ni la más agradable. A veces, si lo que se desea es hacer una reforma, el único camino sería jubilar a las buenas personas por las que todo el mundo siente cariño, eliminándolas por completo.

El doctor Sprague, a quien se consideraba el médico de más «peso», aunque con frecuencia se decía también que el doctor Minchin tenía más penetración, vació su ancho rostro de toda expresión y estuvo contemplando su copa de vino mientras hablaba Lydgate. Todo lo que no era problemático y sospechoso en aquel joven —por ejemplo, cierta ostentación de ideas extranjeras, y una tendencia a poner en tela de juicio lo que habían establecido y olvidado sus mayores— resultaba muy desagradable para un médico con prestigio consolidado treinta años antes con un tratado sobre meningitis, del que por lo menos un ejemplar con la inscripción «de mi propiedad» estaba encuadernado en piel. Por mi parte, confieso compartir algunos de los sentimientos del doctor Sprague. La satisfacción que producen los propios méritos es un tipo de propiedad no sometida a impuestos cuya depreciación resulta muy desagradable.

El comentario de Lydgate, sin embargo, no encontró eco favorable entre los presentes. El señor Vincy dijo que, si de él dependiera, no colocaría a personas desagradables en ningún puesto.

—¡Al diablo con sus reformas! —dijo el señor Chichely—. No hay embuste más grande en el mundo. Siempre que se oye hablar de reformas, se trata únicamente de un truco para cambiar a las personas. Espero que no sea usted uno de los colaboradores de *The Lancet*[46], señor Lydgate… esa revista que quiere quitar el trabajo de *coroner* de las manos de los profesionales de la justicia: me da la impresión de que sus palabras apuntan en ese sentido.

—Tengo una pésima opinión de Wakley —intervino el doctor Sprague—; no creo que nadie la tenga peor que yo: es una persona con mala intención, dispuesto, con tal de conseguir cierta notoriedad personal, a sacrificar la respetabilidad de la profesión que, como todo el mundo sabe, depende de los Colegios de Londres. Hay personas a quienes no les importa que las llenen de cardenales con tal de que se hable de ellas. Pero Wakley tiene razón a veces —añadió el doctor juiciosamente—. Podría citar uno o dos puntos en los que Wakley está en lo cierto.

—Bueno —dijo el señor Chichely—, yo no voy a condenar a ningún hombre por defender a sus colegas; pero, si hablamos de cosas concretas, me gustaría saber cómo un *coroner* podrá juzgar las pruebas de que dispone si no ha recibido una formación jurídica.

—En mi opinión —dijo Lydgate—, la formación jurídica solo sirve para hacer a un hombre más incompetente en cuestiones que exigen conocimientos de otro tipo. La gente habla de las pruebas como si realmente pudiera pesarlas en la balanza una justicia ciega. Nadie sabe lo que es una buena prueba en un determinado terreno a no ser que conozca bien ese terreno. Un abogado no es mejor que una anciana en un examen *post mortem*. ¿Cómo va a reconocer la acción de un veneno? Igual podría usted decir que contar las sílabas de un verso le enseñará a pronosticar la cosecha de patatas.

—Le imagino sabedor de que no es función del *coroner* llevar a cabo el *post mortem*, sino tan solo recoger la declaración del testigo médico —dijo el señor Chichely, con cierto desdén.

—Quien con frecuencia es casi tan ignorante como el mismo *coroner* —dijo Lydgate—. Las cuestiones de jurisprudencia médica no deberían quedar al albur de que el testigo médico tenga unos conocimientos razonables, ni el *coroner* debería ser un hombre dispuesto a creer que la estricnina destruye los tejidos del estómago porque un médico ignorante le diga que es así.

Lydgate había perdido por completo de vista el hecho de que el señor Chichely era *coroner* de su majestad, y terminó inocentemente con la pregunta:

—¿No está usted de acuerdo conmigo, doctor Sprague?

—Hasta cierto punto… en lo referente a distritos populosos, y en las metrópolis —dijo el doctor—. Pero confío en que pase mucho tiempo antes de que esta parte del país pierda los servicios de mi amigo Chichely, incluso aunque se consiga al más dotado de entre nuestros colegas para sustituirlo. Estoy seguro

de que Vincy me apoyará en esto.

—Sí, claro; yo siempre preferiré un *coroner* que sepa cazar —dijo el señor Vincy jovialmente—. Y en mi opinión, se está más seguro con un abogado. Nadie puede saberlo todo. La mayoría de las cosas son manifestaciones del favor o de la ira de Dios. En cuanto a los envenenamientos, creo que lo que hace falta es conocer la ley. ¿Qué les parece si nos reunimos con las señoras?

La opinión privada de Lydgate era que el señor Chichely podía muy bien ser el *coroner* que lo ignoraba todo sobre los tejidos del estómago, pero no había sido su intención hacer alusiones personales. Aquella era una de las dificultades de frecuentar la buena sociedad de Middlemarch: resultaba peligroso insistir en el saber como requisito para cualquier cargo retribuido. Fred Vincy había calificado a Lydgate de pedante y ahora el señor Chichely se sentía inclinado a considerarlo presuntuoso, sobre todo cuando en el salón procuró por todos los medios hacerse agradable a Rosamond, a quien monopolizó sin dificultad en un *tête-à-tête*, ya que la señora Vincy en persona se ocupó de servir el té. La mujer del alcalde no cedía a su hija ninguna función doméstica; y el rostro lozano y lleno de buen humor de la matrona, con las cintas de color rosa demasiado volátiles que flotaban alrededor de su hermosa garganta, y su alegre manera de comportarse con su marido y con sus hijos, figuraban sin duda entre los grandes atractivos de la casa de los Vincy… atractivos que hacían aún más fácil enamorarse de la hija. El matiz de vulgaridad inofensiva y sin pretensiones de la madre realzaba el refinamiento de Rosamond, superior a lo que Lydgate había esperado.

Sin duda alguna unos pies diminutos y unos hombros perfectamente torneados ayudan a crear la impresión de modales refinados, y el comentario acertado se convierte en asombroso cuando va acompañado de unos labios y de unos ojos exquisitamente dibujados. Y Rosamond hacía comentarios acertados; porque era inteligente, con ese tipo de inteligencia que capta todos los tonos menos el humorístico. Afortunadamente, nunca trataba de bromear, y esa era quizá la prueba más clara de su inteligencia.

Lydgate y ella empezaron a hablar sin dificultad. El médico lamentó no haberla oído cantar el día anterior en Stone Court. El único placer que se había permitido durante la última parte de su estancia en París era oír música.

—Habrá estudiado usted algún instrumento, probablemente —dijo Rosamond.

—No; conozco el canto de muchos pájaros, y muchas melodías de oído; pero la música que no conozco en absoluto y de la que nada sé, me deleita… me afecta. ¡Qué estúpido es el mundo que no hace más uso de un placer como ese, si lo tiene a su alcance!

—Sí, y descubrirá que Middlemarch está bastante desentonado. Es muy difícil encontrar buenos músicos. Yo solo conozco dos caballeros que canten bien.

—Supongo que está de moda cantar canciones cómicas de forma rítmica, dejándole a uno que se imagine la melodía… ¿como si estuvieran tocándola con un tambor?

—Ah, veo que ha oído usted al señor Bowyer —dijo Rosamond, con una de sus poco frecuentes sonrisas —. Pero no hacemos más que hablar mal de nuestros vecinos.

Lydgate casi se estaba olvidando de que tenía que mantener la conversación mientras pensaba en el encanto de aquella criatura; en su vestido, que parecía estar hecho del más delicado azul celeste; en ella, tan inmaculadamente rubia, como si los pétalos de alguna flor gigantesca acabaran de abrirse para dejarla al descubierto; y en cómo, al mismo tiempo, aquellos infantiles cabellos dorados mostraban una elegancia tan segura, tan dueña de sí. Desde su episodio con Laure, Lydgate había perdido el gusto por los silencios de las mujeres de ojos grandes: la diosa Isis había dejado de atraerle, y Rosamond era exactamente lo contrario. Pero consiguió recuperarse.

—Espero que me permita oír algo de música esta noche.

—Le dejaré que escuche mis pobres interpretaciones, si así lo desea —dijo Rosamond—. Papá insistirá en que cante. Pero me echaré a temblar delante de usted, que ha oído a los mejores cantantes de París. Yo he oído muy poco: solo he estado una vez en Londres. Pero el organista de St Peter es un buen músico, y sigo estudiando con él.

—Cuénteme lo que vio en Londres.

—Muy poco. —Una chica más ingenua hubiese dicho: «¡Lo vi todo!», pero Rosamond sabía que no era así—. Algunas de las vistas más corrientes, que siempre se enseñan a las pobres chicas provincianas.

—¿Se considera usted una pobre chica provinciana? —preguntó Lydgate, mirándola con el involuntario asombro de la admiración y haciendo que Rosamond se ruborizara de placer. Pero, sin perder su expresión seria, giró un poco el esbelto cuello y alzó la mano para tocarse una de sus maravillosas trenzas… un gesto suyo habitual, tan delicioso como el movimiento de la pata de un gatito. Y no es que Rosamond fuese en absoluto un gatito, sino una sílfide capturada muy joven y educada en el internado de la señora Lemon.

—Le aseguro que mi inteligencia está totalmente sin formar —dijo ella inmediatamente—; tal vez no se note en Middlemarch. No me importa hablar con nuestros vecinos de siempre. Pero usted me da muchísimo miedo.

—Una mujer instruida casi siempre sabe más que nosotros los hombres, aunque sus conocimientos sean distintos. Estoy seguro de que podría enseñarme mil cosas… como un ave exquisita podría enseñar a un oso si existiera un lenguaje común entre los dos. Afortunadamente, existe un idioma común entre hombres y mujeres y por eso es posible que los osos aprendan.

—¡Ah! ¡Ahí está Fred aporreando el piano! Tendré que ir, para evitar que destroce los nervios de todos —dijo la señorita Vincy, dirigiéndose hacia el otro extremo de la habitación, donde Fred, después de abrir el piano por deseo de su padre, para que Rosamond pudiera ofrecerles algo de música, estaba interpretando como a escondidas *Cereza madura* con una sola mano. Personas muy capaces que han aprobado sus exámenes finales también hacen a veces cosas así, igual que el suspendido Fred.

—Fred, haz el favor de dejar tus ejercicios para mañana; pondrás enfermo al señor Lydgate —dijo Rosamond—. Tiene oído.

Fred se echó a reír, y continuó con su melodía hasta el final.

Rosamond se volvió hacia Lydgate, sonriendo amablemente, y dijo:

—¿Se da usted cuenta? Los osos no siempre se dejan enseñar.

—¡Vamos a ver, Rosy! —dijo Fred, incorporándose con viveza del taburete y haciendo girar hacia arriba el asiento, con un contagioso convencimiento de ir a pasarlo bien—. Primero, una buena melodía que nos anime.

Rosamond tocaba admirablemente. Su maestro en el internado de la señora Lemon (próximo a una capital de condado de memorable historia, cuyas reliquias eran la iglesia y el castillo), uno de esos excelentes músicos que se encuentran de vez en cuando en nuestras provincias, podía compararse dignamente con muchos afamados Kapellmeisters de un país que ofrece más amplias posibilidades de celebridad musical que el nuestro. Rosamond, con instinto de intérprete, había asimilado su manera de tocar, y repetía sus sentidas versiones de nobles obras musicales con la precisión de un eco. Resultaba casi desconcertante cuando se la oía por primera vez. Un alma escondida parecía manar de los dedos de Rosamond; y así era, efectivamente, ya que las almas perviven en ecos perpetuos, y a toda expresión elevada corresponde en algún sitio una actividad original, aunque solo sea la de un intérprete. Aquella música se apoderó de Lydgate, que empezó a considerar a Rosamond algo excepcional. Después de todo, pensó, uno no tiene por qué sorprenderse de encontrar conjunción tan extraordinaria de perfecciones pese a circunstancias a primera vista poco favorables: dondequiera que surjan, siempre dependen de condiciones que nada tienen de obvio. Lydgate siguió sentado contemplándola, y no se levantó para felicitarla, dejando eso para los demás, ahora que su admiración era mucho más intensa.

Su forma de cantar era menos notable, pero también lo hacía con técnica excelente, y su voz resultaba tan grata al oído como un carillón perfectamente afinado. Es cierto que Rosamond cantó *Ven conmigo a la luz de la luna* y *He andado errante*, porque los mortales han de compartir las modas de su tiempo y solo los antiguos son siempre clásicos. Pero la hija del señor Vincy también era capaz de cantar *Susan, la de los ojos negros* con eficacia, o las *canzonete* de Haydn, o *Voi, che sapete* o *Batti, batti*; Rosamond solo deseaba saber lo que su público prefería.

Su padre iba contemplando sucesivamente a todos los presentes, feliz al comprobar su admiración. La madre permanecía sentada, como Níobe antes de su desgracia, con su hija pequeña sobre el regazo, agitando suavemente la mano de la niña arriba y abajo, marcando el ritmo de la música. Y Fred, a pesar de su general escepticismo acerca de Rosy, escuchaba la música de esta con total entrega, deseando poder hacer lo mismo con su flauta. Era la reunión familiar más simpática en la que Lydgate había participado desde su llegada a Middlemarch. Los Vincy tenían la disponibilidad para disfrutar, la capacidad para rechazar la ansiedad y la fe en la vida como fuentes de alegría suficientes para convertir un hogar así en algo excepcional en la mayoría de los pequeños núcleos urbanos de la época, donde el evangelismo había arrojado una sombra de sospecha, semejante a una enfermedad infecciosa, sobre las pocas diversiones que aún sobrevivían en las provincias. En casa de los Vincy siempre se jugaba al *whist* y las mesas para las cartas ya estaban listas, haciendo que algunos de los presentes desearan secretamente que terminase la música. Antes de que cesara apareció el señor Farebrother, hombre bien parecido, ancho de pecho pero breve de estatura, unos cuarenta años de edad y ropa talar muy raída: el brillo quedaba concentrado en sus ágiles ojos grises. Su presencia fue como un agradable cambio en el tono de luz y, al detener a la pequeña Louisa con alguna broma paternal cuando salía del salón conducida por la señorita Morgan y saludar a todos con unas palabras especiales para cada uno, dio la impresión de condensar más conversación en diez minutos de

la que habían intercambiado todos los presentes en el curso de la velada. A Lydgate le exigió que cumpliera su promesa de ir a visitarlo.

—No estoy dispuesto a renunciar, ¿sabe?, porque tengo que enseñarle algunos escarabajos. Los coleccionistas no dejamos de interesarnos por los recién llegados hasta que han visto todo lo que tenemos que mostrarles.

Pero muy pronto se dirigió hacia la mesa del *whist*, frotándose las manos y diciendo:

—Bien, ¡pongámonos serios! ¿Señor Lydgate? ¿No juega usted? ¡Ah! Es demasiado joven y frívolo para cosas como esta.

Lydgate se dijo a sí mismo que aquel clérigo, cuyos talentos resultaban tan penosos para el señor Bulstrode, parecía haber encontrado un agradable refugio en un hogar que nada tenía de erudito, ciertamente. Al joven doctor le pareció lógico a medias: el buen humor, el amable aspecto de los de más edad y de los jóvenes y la posibilidad de pasar el tiempo sin esforzar la inteligencia, podían hacer que la casa sedujera a personas sin nada mejor a que dedicar sus horas de asueto.

Todo resultaba lozano y alegre a excepción de la señorita Morgan, que era morena, insípida y resignada y, en conjunto, como la señora Vincy decía con frecuencia, precisamente la persona idónea para ser institutriz. Lydgate no tenía intención de hacer muchas visitas como aquella. Eran una lastimosa pérdida de tiempo; y muy pronto, en cuanto hubiera hablado un poco más con Rosamond, tenía intención de disculparse y marcharse.

—Estoy segura de que no va a gustarle la sociedad de Middlemarch —dijo ella, cuando los jugadores terminaron de instalarse—. Somos unas gentes muy estúpidas y usted está acostumbrado a algo muy distinto.

—Imagino que las ciudades de provincia se parecen mucho unas a otras —dijo Lydgate—. Pero, por lo que he observado, todo el mundo tiende a creer que su ciudad es más estúpida que las demás. Estoy decidido a aceptar Middlemarch tal como es, y me sentiré muy agradecido si la ciudad me acepta a mí de la misma manera. Y desde luego he hallado en ella algunas cosas mucho más atractivas de lo que esperaba.

—Se refiere usted a los paseos a Tipton y Lowick; a todo el mundo le gustan —dijo Rosamond con sencillez.

—No, me refiero a algo mucho más cercano a mí.

Rosamond se levantó para coger su labor y luego dijo:

—¿Le gustaría bailar? No estoy muy segura de que los hombres inteligentes bailen.

—Bailaría con usted, si me lo permitiera.

—¡Oh! —dijo Rosamond, con una breve risa como de disculpa—. Solo iba a decir que a veces damos bailes y quería saber si se sentirá usted insultado si le pedimos que venga.

—No, con la condición que ya he mencionado.

Después de aquel diálogo Lydgate pensó en marcharse, pero al acercarse a las mesas de *whist*, se interesó por la manera de jugar del señor Farebrother, que era magistral, y también por su rostro, que ofrecía una llamativa mezcla de astucia y mansedumbre. A las diez se sirvió un tentempié (tal era lo que se acostumbraba hacer en Middlemarch) y se bebió ponche; pero el señor Farebrother solo tomó un vaso de agua. Estaba ganando y como no parecía haber ninguna razón para que la partida terminara pronto, Lydgate optó finalmente por marcharse.

Pero, como no eran todavía las once, decidió pasear, disfrutando del aire vigorizante, hacia la torre de St Botolph, la iglesia del señor Farebrother, que se recortaba oscura, cuadrada y maciza contra la luz de las estrellas. Era el templo más antiguo de Middlemarch; el beneficio, sin embargo, dotaba tan solo un vicariato y apenas llegaba a las cuatrocientas libras al año. Lydgate había oído hablar de aquello y se preguntó si al señor Farebrother le interesaba el dinero que ganaba a las cartas, pensando: «Parece un tipo muy agradable, pero Bulstrode quizá tenga sus buenas razones». A Lydgate le resultarían más fáciles muchas cosas si las acciones del señor Bulstrode estuvieran en general justificadas. «¿Qué me importa su doctrina religiosa si va acompañada de algunas buenas ideas? Hay que usar esos cerebros dondequiera que se encuentren».

Tales fueron de hecho sus primeros pensamientos mientras se alejaba de casa del señor Vincy, y en este sentido me temo que muchas señoras difícilmente podrán considerarlo digno de su atención. El joven médico solo pensó en Rosamond y en su música en segundo lugar; y, aunque cuando le llegó el turno retuvo su imagen durante el resto del paseo, no sintió agitación alguna ni tuvo la sensación de que hubiera surgido una nueva corriente en su vida. Todavía no estaba en condiciones de casarse; no deseaba hacerlo hasta que hubieran pasado varios años; y, por tanto, rechazaba la idea de estar enamorado de una muchacha por el simple hecho de encontrarla atractiva. Y era cierto que Rosamond le gustaba extraordinariamente; pero la locura que Laure había originado en él en una ocasión no era probable que se repitiera, pensaba Lydgate. A

decir verdad, si de lo que se trataba era de enamorarse, habría sido muy prudente hacerlo de una criatura como la señorita Vincy, que poseía exactamente la clase de inteligencia que uno desearía en una mujer: perfecta, refinada, dócil, prestándose a colaborar en todas las cosas delicadas de la vida y encerrada en un cuerpo que expresaba todo esto con un vigor que hacía innecesaria cualquier otra prueba. Lydgate se sintió seguro de que, si llegaba a casarse alguna vez, su mujer tendría el suave resplandor y la característica feminidad que debe colocarse en la compañía de las flores y de la música; esa especie de belleza que era virtuosa por su misma naturaleza y que estaba moldeada únicamente para las más puras y delicadas alegrías.

Pero como no tenía intención de casarse hasta transcurridos al menos cinco años, su ocupación más urgente era leer el nuevo libro de Louis[47] sobre la fiebre, que le interesaba de manera especial, porque había conocido al autor en París y tuvo ocasión de presenciar muchas investigaciones anatómicas para averiguar las diferencias específicas entre el tifus y las fiebres tifoideas. Al llegar a su casa estuvo leyendo hasta las primeras horas de la madrugada, aportando a este estudio patológico una visión de los detalles y de las relaciones mucho más analítica de la que nunca había considerado necesario aplicar a las complejidades del amor y del matrimonio, ya que estos últimos eran asuntos sobre los que se sentía ampliamente informado por la literatura y por esa sabiduría tradicional que se transmite en las joviales conversaciones entre hombres solos. En cambio, los condicionamientos de la fiebre eran oscuros y le proporcionaban ese delicioso trabajo de la imaginación que no es simple arbitrariedad, sino el ejercicio de una disciplinada capacidad que combina y construye con una visión clara de las probabilidades y la más plena obediencia al conocimiento, para después, en alianza aún más enérgica con la naturaleza imparcial, permanecer al margen e inventar pruebas con que valorar el propio trabajo.

Se ha alabado a muchos hombres por la viveza de su imaginación sin otro motivo que la abundancia con que producen dibujos sin personalidad y narraciones sin valor: relatos de insignificantes conversaciones que tienen lugar en orbes distantes; o retratos de Lucifer bajando a realizar sus malas acciones como un hombre grande y feo con alas de murciélago y chorros repentinos de fosforescencia; o exageraciones extravagantes que parecen reflejar la vida en un sueño enfermizo. Pero Lydgate consideraba ese tipo de inspiración algo más bien vulgar y ligado a excesos alcohólicos, si se lo comparaba con la imaginación que revela sutiles acciones inaccesibles a cualquier tipo de lente, pero que pueden descubrirse en la oscuridad exterior a través de largos senderos, necesariamente encadenados, gracias a esa luz interior que es el último refinamiento de la energía, capaz de bañar incluso los átomos etéreos en su espacio idealmente iluminado. Él, por su parte, había renunciado a todas las invenciones baratas donde la ignorancia se siente competente y a sus anchas: Lydgate estaba enamorado de esa ardua capacidad de invención que es el meollo mismo de la investigación, que enmarca de manera provisional su objeto y va corrigiendo el punto de vista hasta conseguir poco a poco una mayor exactitud en la relación; quería arrojar luz sobre la oscuridad de esos procesos microscópicos que preparan las alegrías y los sufrimientos humanos, sobre esas invisibles avenidas que son los primeros sitios donde acechan la angustia, las obsesiones y los delitos, esos delicados equilibrios y transiciones que determinan la formación de una conciencia feliz o desgraciada.

Mientras abandonaba el libro, estirando las piernas hacia los rescoldos del fuego de la chimenea y uniendo las manos por detrás de la cabeza, con ese agradable hormigueo de satisfacción que se produce cuando el entendimiento salta del examen de un objeto específico a un difuso sentimiento de sus conexiones con el resto de nuestra existencia —cuando parece, por así decirlo, ponerse de espaldas después de haber nadado vigorosamente y flotar con la tranquilidad de una fuerza todavía disponible—, Lydgate sintió un deleite triunfal en sus estudios y algo semejante a la piedad por hombres menos afortunados que no eran de su profesión.

«Si no hubiese dado aquel giro cuando no era más que un muchacho —pensó—, quizá me habría puesto a hacer cualquier estúpido trabajo de caballo de tiro y hubiese vivido siempre con anteojeras. Nunca habría sido feliz en una profesión que no exigiera el máximo esfuerzo intelectual y que al mismo tiempo no me mantuviera en estrecho y cordial contacto con mis vecinos. No hay nada como la medicina para eso: se puede tener la vida científica que abre tan amplios horizontes y está al alcance de tan pocos, y ser al mismo tiempo amigo de todos los vejestorios de la parroquia. Eso es bastante más difícil para un clérigo: Farebrother parece ser un caso anómalo».

Este último pensamiento hizo que Lydgate volviera a los Vincy y a todas las escenas de la velada, que desfilaron agradablemente ante su imaginación y, mientras cogía la palmatoria para ir a acostarse, sus labios se curvaron con esa sombra de sonrisa que acompaña de ordinario a los recuerdos placenteros. Lydgate era un hombre ardiente, pero en aquel momento lo que acaparaba todo su entusiasmo era el amor por su trabajo y la ambición de que llegara a reconocerse su contribución a la mejora de las condiciones de

vida de la humanidad, como había sucedido con otros héroes de la ciencia que empezaron con una simple consulta de médico general en una oscura ciudad de provincias.

¡Pobre Lydgate! Aunque quizá debiera decir mejor: ¡pobre Rosamond! Ambos vivían en mundos privados que se ignoraban mutuamente. A Lydgate no se le ocurrió que había sido objeto de intensa meditación para Rosamond, quien carecía de razones para colocar su matrimonio en una lejana perspectiva y no llevaba a cabo estudios patológicos que apartaran su pensamiento del hábito de dar vueltas a las cosas, de esa interior repetición de miradas, palabras y frases que llenan una buena parte de la vida de la mayoría de las muchachas. Lydgate, al mirarla o hablar con ella, solo tenía intención de dedicarle la inevitable dosis de admiración y galantería que se debe a una muchacha tan hermosa; de hecho le parecía que apenas había expresado con palabras el placer que le produjera su música, por temor a incurrir en la descortesía de manifestar su sorpresa al descubrirla en posesión de tan gran talento interpretativo. Pero Rosamond había recogido cada una de sus miradas y de sus palabras, considerándolas las primeras escaramuzas de una aventura romántica ya prevista de antemano; escaramuzas que adquieren valor precisamente porque se adivina su desarrollo y culminación. En las fantasías románticas de Rosamond no era necesario imaginar muchas cosas sobre la vida interior del héroe o sobre sus importantes ocupaciones en el mundo; estaba claro que tenía una profesión y era inteligente, además de bien parecido. Pero el mayor atractivo de Lydgate era su excelente cuna, cosa que le distinguía de todos los admiradores de Rosamond en Middlemarch y añadía al matrimonio la perspectiva de ascender en la escala social y acercarse un poco más a esa celestial situación en la tierra en la que la señorita Vincy ya no tendría que relacionarse con personas vulgares y sí, quizá en cambio, con parientes al mismo nivel de los notables del condado que menospreciaban a los habitantes de Middlemarch. Parte de la inteligencia de Rosamond consistía en distinguir con gran precisión hasta el más débil aroma de rango social y, en una ocasión en que vio a las dos señoritas Brooke acompañando a su tío a una de las sesiones periódicas del tribunal del condado y sentándose entre los miembros de la aristocracia, las envidió, a pesar de la sencillez con que iban vestidas.

Si alguien considera increíble que Lydgate, como hombre de elevada categoría social, causara a Rosamond escalofríos de satisfacción relacionados con la idea de estar enamorada de él, tendré que rogar a esa persona que utilice su capacidad para establecer comparaciones de manera un poco más eficaz y considere si el paño rojo y las charreteras no han tenido nunca una influencia similar. Nuestras pasiones no viven aisladas en compartimientos estancos, sino que, después de vestirse en su pequeño guardarropa de ideas, traen sus revisiones a una mesa común y almuerzan juntas, alimentándose de las reservas comunes de acuerdo con su apetito.

Rosamond, de hecho, estaba enteramente ocupada con Tertius Lydgate, pero no para interesarse por él en sí mismo, sino en su relación con ella; y era disculpable que una muchacha acostumbrada a oír que todos los jóvenes tenían que enamorarse de la encantadora señorita Vincy antes o después, no creyera que Lydgate fuese a ser una excepción. Sus miradas y sus palabras significaban para ella más que las de otros hombres porque le interesaban más: pensaba en ellas con asiduidad, y asiduamente valoraba la perfección en la apariencia exterior, en el comportamiento, en los sentimientos y en todos los demás campos de la elegancia con la seguridad de que encontraría en Lydgate el mejor admirador de todos los que había conocido hasta entonces.

Porque Rosamond, aunque nunca llegara a hacer nada que no le resultase agradable, era muy trabajadora; y ahora más que nunca se mostró activa en dibujar paisajes y carros de campesinos y retratos de amigos, en dedicar a la música todo el tiempo debido y en ser, de la mañana a la noche, el más acabado ejemplo de una perfecta dama, siempre con un espectador muy concreto en la imaginación y a veces con la añadidura, muy bien recibida, de un público de carne y hueso, variable en número, constituido por los numerosos visitantes que acudían a su casa. También encontró tiempo para leer las mejores novelas e incluso las que eran un poco menos buenas y aprendió muchos versos de memoria. Su poema favorito era *Lalla Rookh*[48].

«¡La mejor chica del mundo! ¡Qué feliz será el hombre que se case con ella!» era la opinión generalizada de los caballeros de edad madura que visitaban a los Vincy; y los jóvenes que ya habían sido rechazados pensaban en intentarlo de nuevo, como es costumbre en ciudades de provincias donde no abundan los posibles rivales. Pero la señora Plymdale pensaba que Rosamond había recibido una educación absurdamente refinada para sus posibilidades, porque ¿de qué iban a servir todos aquellos conocimientos si quedarían arrinconados tan pronto como se casara? Su tía Harriet, por otra parte, que mantenía una fidelidad fraternal a la familia de su hermano, deseaba sinceramente dos cosas para su sobrina: que llegara a adoptar una actitud más seria ante la vida y que consiguiera encontrar un marido cuya posición económica estuviera en consonancia con sus costumbres.

Capítulo XVII

El clérigo sonrió y dijo:
Doncella hermosa, la Promesa,
pero, por culpa de su pobreza
murió soltera.

El reverendo Camden Farebrother, a quien Lydgate fue a ver la tarde siguiente, vivía en una vieja casa parroquial, hecha de piedra, lo bastante venerable para no desentonar con la iglesia que tenía al lado. Todos los muebles que había en la casa también eran viejos, pero con otro grado distinto de edad: la del padre y el abuelo del señor Farebrother. Había sillas pintadas de blanco, con dorados y guirnaldas, y antiguos damasquinados de seda roja con algunos rotos; láminas con retratos de lores cancilleres y otros célebres abogados del siglo pasado; había también grandes espejos para reflejarlos, así como mesitas de caoba y sofás que parecían una prolongación de las incómodas sillas, todo ello muy destacado sobre el oscuro revestimiento de madera que cubría las paredes. Esa era la fisonomía del salón en el que se hizo entrar a Lydgate y donde lo recibieron tres señoras, también muy chapadas a la antigua, y de una respetabilidad algo descolorida pero auténtica: la señora Farebrother, la madre del vicario, anciana de pelo blanco, con volantes y pañoleta inmaculadamente limpios, erguida, de ojos vivos y todavía por debajo de los setenta; la señorita Noble, su hermana, una diminuta anciana de aspecto más sumiso, con unos volantes y una pañoleta decididamente más gastados y remendados; y la señorita Winifred Farebrother, la hermana mayor del vicario, bien parecida, como el mismo Farebrother, pero reprimida y sojuzgada como suele suceder con las mujeres solteras que pasan la vida en ininterrumpida sujeción a sus mayores. Lydgate no pensaba encontrarse con un grupo tan singular: sabiendo simplemente que el señor Farebrother era soltero, esperaba que lo llevaran a un cómodo estudio donde los muebles más importantes serían probablemente los libros y las típicas colecciones de un devoto de la naturaleza. El mismo vicario parecía tener un aspecto distinto, como suele pasar con la mayoría de los hombres cuando personas que los han conocido en otro sitio los ven por vez primera en su propia casa; algunos, efectivamente, dan la impresión de ser actores especializados en papeles simpáticos y desventajosamente contratados para hacer de cascarrabias en una nueva pieza. No era ese el caso del señor Farebrother, que tan solo resultaba un poco más apacible y más silencioso, porque quien llevaba la voz cantante era su madre, mientras él se limitaba a añadir de vez en cuando una observación bien humorada y moderadora. La anciana señora estaba sin duda acostumbrada a decir a sus interlocutores lo que tenían que pensar, sin considerar que pudiera existir algún tema que no necesitara de su dirección, y disponía de tiempo libre para aquella tarea gracias a que la señorita Winifred se ocupaba de atender a todas sus pequeñas necesidades. Mientras tanto, la diminuta señorita Noble, que llevaba al brazo una pequeña cesta, introdujo en ella un terrón de azúcar, que previamente había dejado caer en su platillo como por equivocación; luego miró furtivamente alrededor y volvió a ocuparse de su taza de té con un inocente ruidito como el que podría producir un diminuto y tímido cuadrúpedo. Por favor, que nadie piense mal de la señorita Noble. El cesto contenía pequeñas cantidades de alimentos fáciles de transportar, destinados a los hijos de sus amistades más necesitadas, a los que iba a visitar las mañanas de buen tiempo; porque acariciar y dar de comer a todas las criaturas necesitadas era para ella un placer tan espontáneo que lo consideraba en gran parte un agradable vicio al que le resultaba imposible resistirse. Quizá se sabía tentada de robar a los que tenían mucho para dárselo a los que se hallaban privados de todo, y llevaba en la conciencia la culpabilidad de aquel deseo reprimido. ¡Se ha de ser pobre para apreciar el

lujo de dar!

La señora Farebrother recibió al invitado con ceremoniosa precisión pero también con viveza. En seguida le informó de que muy pocas veces se necesitaba asistencia médica en aquella casa. Había enseñado a sus hijos a llevar ropa de franela y a no comer en exceso, costumbre que consideraba razón fundamental de que la gente necesitase médicos. Lydgate trató de incluir también a aquellas personas cuyos padres habían comido a su vez más de la cuenta, pero la señora Farebrother consideró peligroso aquel punto de vista: la naturaleza era más justa; sería muy fácil para cualquier malvado decir que habría que ajusticiar a sus antepasados en lugar de ahorcarlo a él. Si los que habían tenido malos padres eran malos, se los ahorcaba por eso. No había ninguna necesidad de volver a lo que no se podía ver.

—Mi madre es como el viejo Jorge III —dijo el vicario—; está en contra de la metafísica.

—Estoy en contra de lo que está mal, Camden. Lo que yo digo es que hay que tener siempre delante unas cuantas verdades muy simples y hacer que todo esté de acuerdo con ellas. Cuando yo era joven, señor Lydgate, nunca había la menor duda sobre lo que estaba bien y lo que estaba mal. Nos sabíamos el catecismo y eso era suficiente; aprendíamos los artículos de la fe y nuestras obligaciones. Todas las personas respetables que iban a la iglesia pensaban de la misma manera. Pero ahora, aunque alguien utilice directamente textos del Libro de Oraciones, corre el peligro de que lo contradigan.

—Eso debe de ser bastante agradable para las personas a quienes les gusta mantener sus propias opiniones —dijo Lydgate.

—Pero mi madre cede siempre —dijo el vicario socarronamente.

—No, no, Camden, no debes dar al señor Lydgate una impresión equivocada sobre mí. Nunca faltaría al respeto a mis padres cediendo en lo que ellos me enseñaron. Cualquiera está en condiciones de ver lo que pasa cuando se cambia de opinión. Si se cambia una vez, ¿por qué no veinte?

—Cabe encontrar buenas razones para cambiar una vez y no volver a encontrarlas para cambiar de nuevo —dijo Lydgate, divertido por aquella anciana tan terminante.

—Tendrá usted que perdonarme en eso. Nunca son razones lo que falta cuando un hombre es inconstante. Mi padre no cambió nunca, y predicaba sermones morales muy sencillos, sin razonamientos, era un buen hombre… pocos hay mejores. Cuando me presente usted un hombre bueno hecho de razonamientos, yo le daré de cenar leyendo de un libro de cocina. Esa es mi opinión y creo que cualquier estómago me dará la razón.

—En lo que se refiere a la cena, sin duda alguna, madre —dijo el señor Farebrother.

—Es la misma cosa, la cena o el hombre. Tengo casi setenta años, señor Lydgate, y hablo por experiencia. No es probable que acepte nuevas ideas, aunque aquí hay tantas como en cualquier otro sitio. Lo que yo digo es que llegan junto con esas telas de mezcla que no resisten ni que se las lave ni que se las use. No eran así las cosas en mi juventud: un feligrés era un feligrés, y un clérigo, puede usted estar completamente seguro, era un caballero, aunque no fuese nada más. Pero ahora tal vez no sea más que un disidente y quiera dar de lado a mi hijo con excusas de doctrina. Pero sea quien fuere el que quiera darle de lado, tengo que decirle con mucho orgullo, señor Lydgate, que mi hijo se puede comparar con cualquier predicador del reino, por no hablar de esta ciudad, donde el nivel es más bien bajo, en mi opinión, al menos, porque yo nací y me crie en Exeter.

—Una madre no es nunca parcial —dijo el señor Farebrother, sonriendo—. ¿Qué crees que dice de él la madre de Tyke?

—¡Ah, pobre mujer! ¿Qué dirá, efectivamente? —dijo la señora Farebrother, el filo momentáneamente mellado por su confianza en los buenos juicios maternos—. A solas consigo misma se dice la verdad, de eso puedes estar seguro.

—¿Y cuál es la verdad? —inquirió Lydgate—. Siento curiosidad por saberlo.

—Nada malo en absoluto —dijo el señor Farebrother—. Es un hombre con mucho celo: no muy instruido, ni muy prudente, creo yo, porque no estoy de acuerdo con él.

—¡Vamos, Camden! —dijo la señorita Winifred—, Griffin y su mujer me han contado hoy mismo cómo el señor Tyke les dijo que no tendrían más carbón si venían a oírte predicar.

La señora Farebrother dejó su labor, que había reanudado después de una muy frugal consumición de té y tostada, y miró a su hijo como diciendo: «¿Oyes eso?».

—¡Pobrecillos! ¡Pobrecillos! —comentó la señorita Noble, en referencia, probablemente, a la doble pérdida de predicación y de carbón.

—Eso se debe a que no son feligreses míos —explicó sosegadamente el vicario—. Y no creo que mis sermones les sean de tanta utilidad como una carga de carbón.

—Señor Lydgate —dijo la señora Farebrother, que no podía dejar pasar aquello—, usted no conoce a mi

hijo: siempre se subestima. Yo le digo que subestima al Dios que lo creó e hizo de él un predicador extraordinario.

—Eso debe de ser una insinuación para que me lleve al señor Lydgate al estudio —dijo el vicario, riendo—. Prometí enseñarle mi colección —añadió, volviéndose hacia el médico—; ¿vamos?

Las tres damas protestaron. No había que llevarse al señor Lydgate a toda prisa sin permitirle que aceptara otra taza de té; aún quedaba mucho y muy bueno en la tetera de la señorita Winifred. ¿Por qué quería Camden llevarse tan pronto al visitante a su cuarto de trabajo? Allí había muchas sabandijas en adobo y cajones llenos de moscardones y polillas, pero faltaba en cambio hasta una alfombra con que cubrir el suelo. El señor Lydgate no tenía necesidad de ir. Sería mucho mejor organizar una partida de naipes. En resumen, quedaba claro que un vicario puede ser venerado por sus familiares del sexo femenino como rey de los hombres y de los predicadores, sin que por ello dejen de considerarlo muy necesitado de dirección. Lydgate, con la característica superficialidad de un soltero joven, se maravilló de que el señor Farebrother no las hubiese educado mejor.

—Mi madre no está acostumbrada a que yo tenga visitantes que se interesan por mis pasatiempos —dijo el vicario, mientras abría la puerta de su estudio, que se hallaba, efectivamente, tan desprovisto de comodidades como las señoras habían dado a entender, con la posible excepción de una pipa de porcelana y una caja de tabaco.

—Los hombres de su profesión no fuman por regla general —dijo el señor Farebrother. Lydgate sonrió e hizo un gesto negativo con la cabeza—. Imagino que tampoco los de la mía. Oirá usted a Bulstrode y a los suyos esgrimir esa pipa contra mí. No saben lo contento que se pondría el demonio si renunciara al tabaco.

—Entiendo. Es usted una persona de constitución irritable y necesita un sedativo. Yo soy más lento y el tabaco me haría perezoso. Me dejaría arrastrar a la pereza y me quedaría allí estancado con todas las fuerzas de que dispongo.

—Y que tiene usted intención de consagrar a su trabajo. Yo soy diez o doce años mayor y he llegado a un acuerdo conmigo mismo. Alimento una o dos debilidades para que no vociferen más de la cuenta. ¿Ve? —continuó el vicario, abriendo varios cajoncitos—, me hago la ilusión de haber llevado a cabo un estudio exhaustivo de la entomología de este distrito. Me ocupo tanto de la fauna como de la flora, pero al menos con los insectos he trabajado a conciencia. Nuestra región es especialmente rica en ortópteros; no sé si… ¡Ah!, veo que está usted mirando ese frasco de cristal en lugar de mi colección de insectos. En realidad no le interesan estas cosas, ¿no es cierto?

—Desde luego mucho menos que este maravilloso monstruo anencéfalo. Nunca he tenido tiempo para dedicarme a la historia natural. Ya de muy joven se despertó en mí el interés por las estructuras, cosa que tiene una relación muy directa con mi profesión. No tengo ningún otro pasatiempo, pero ese es un mar por el que nado muy a gusto.

—¡Ah!, es usted un hombre feliz —dijo el señor Farebrother, volviéndose y empezando a llenar la pipa—. No sabe lo que es sentir la falta del tabaco espiritual: correcciones equivocadas de viejos textos o breves notas sobre una variedad de *Aphis brassicae*, con la firma bien conocida de Philomicron, para la revista *Bobadas*; o un sabio tratado sobre la entomología del Pentateuco, incluyendo todos los insectos no mencionados, pero que los israelitas encontraron probablemente al atravesar el desierto; con una monografía sobre la hormiga, tal como la trató Salomón, que mostraba la armonía del libro de los Proverbios con los resultados de la investigación moderna. ¿No le importa que le fumigue?

Lydgate estaba más sorprendido por la franqueza de aquella conversación que por su implícito significado de que el vicario no estaba convencido de que la Iglesia fuese su vocación. La perfecta distribución de cajones y estantes, y las librerías llenas de lujosos volúmenes ilustrados sobre historia natural, le hicieron pensar de nuevo en las ganancias en el *whist* y en su destino. Pero Lydgate estaba empezando a desear que todo lo que hacía el señor Farebrother pudiera explicarse de la manera más favorable posible. La franqueza del vicario no parecía ser de ese tipo tan desagradable, nacido de una conciencia incómoda, que trata de adelantarse al juicio de los demás, sino que parecía surgir del deseo de aparentar lo menos posible. El señor Farebrother no ignoraba, sin embargo, que aquella libertad de expresión suya podía parecer prematura, porque dijo en seguida:

—Todavía no le he dicho que me encuentro en una posición ventajosa sobre usted, señor Lydgate, y que le conozco mejor de lo que usted me conoce a mí. ¿Se acuerda de Trawley, que compartió su apartamento de París durante algún tiempo? Nos escribíamos, y me contó bastantes cosas de usted. Cuando llegó a Middlemarch no estaba seguro de que se tratara de la misma persona y me alegró mucho descubrir que sí, efectivamente. Pero no me olvido de que usted no ha dispuesto de un prólogo semejante sobre mí.

Lydgate adivinó una manifestación de delicadeza en aquellas palabras, pero solo la entendió a medias.

—Por cierto —dijo—, ¿qué se ha hecho de Trawley? Le he perdido la pista por completo. Le interesaban muchísimo los sistemas sociales franceses y hablaba de retirarse a algún lugar remoto para fundar una especie de comunidad pitagórica. ¿Ha llegado a hacerlo?

—Nada de eso. Practica la medicina en un balneario alemán y se ha casado con una paciente rica.

—En ese caso mis ideas resisten mejor, por el momento —dijo Lydgate, con una breve risa despectiva—. Trawley insistía en que la profesión médica desemboca inevitablemente en la hipocresía. Yo decía que la falta estaba en los hombres… hombres que se someten servilmente a las mentiras y a la estupidez. En lugar de predicar contra la hipocresía desde fuera, puede que sea mejor montar un aparato desinfectante en el interior. En resumen: le estoy repitiendo mis propias palabras y puede tener la seguridad de que el sentido común estaba de mi parte.

—Su plan es bastante más difícil de llevar a la práctica que la comunidad pitagórica, mucho me temo. No solo tiene usted en contra dentro de sí mismo al viejo Adán, sino también a todos esos descendientes de nuestro padre común que forman la sociedad que le rodea. Dese cuenta de que yo ya he pagado doce o trece años más que usted por el conocimiento que tengo de las dificultades. Pero… —el señor Farebrother se interrumpió un momento y luego continuó—: veo que contempla de nuevo ese frasco de cristal. ¿Quiere que hagamos un trueque? No le dejaré llevárselo sin una justa compensación.

—Poseo algunos excelentes ejemplares de anélidos marinos conservados en alcohol. Y estoy dispuesto a añadir el último trabajo de Robert Brown[49], *Observaciones microscópicas del polen de las plantas*, si es que no lo tiene usted todavía.

—La verdad es que aprovechándome de lo mucho que le apetece el monstruo, quizá pueda pedirle un precio más alto. Supongamos que le pido que examine mi colección y me diga si está de acuerdo con mis nuevas especies. —El vicario, con la pipa en la boca, fue trasladándose mientras hablaba hasta colocarse finalmente con expresión afectuosa junto al mueble de los insectos—. Un buen ejercicio de disciplina para un joven médico que ha de complacer a sus pacientes de Middlemarch. Tiene usted que aprender a aburrirse, recuérdelo. De todas formas, acepto sus condiciones para quedarse con el monstruo.

—¿No le parece que los hombres sobrestiman la necesidad de seguirle la corriente a todo el mundo y que llega un momento en que los mismos tontos a quienes procuran complacer terminan despreciándolos? —dijo Lydgate, colocándose al lado del señor Farebrother y contemplando con aire más bien ausente los insectos colocados en estricta gradación de tamaños, con sus nombres escritos debajo en exquisita caligrafía —. El camino más corto es hacer notar el propio valer, para que la gente tenga que contar con nosotros tanto si la adulamos como si no.

—No puedo estar más de acuerdo. Pero en este caso hay que tener confianza total en el propio valer y además mantenerse independiente. Muy pocos hombres lo consiguen. O bien uno deja de funcionar y pierde toda utilidad o va enjaezado con los demás y nota el tirón cuando lo empujan sus compañeros de yugo. Pero ¡hágame el favor de contemplar estos delicados ortópteros!

Lydgate no tuvo más remedio a la larga que examinar con brevedad cada uno de los cajones con el vicario, que se reía de sí mismo pero estaba decidido a mostrarle toda la colección.

—Sobre eso que ha dicho usted a propósito de ir uncido al yugo —empezó Lydgate, cuando se sentaron de nuevo—, decidí hace tiempo someterme lo menos posible a tales restricciones. Esa es la razón de que no tratara de establecerme en Londres, al menos por un buen número de años. No me gustó lo que vi cuando estudiaba allí: demasiadas grandes reputaciones sin fundamento y demasiadas zancadillas desleales. En provincias, la gente tiene menos pretensiones sobre el nivel de sus conocimientos y la relación profesional es menos íntima, pero por esa misma razón es menor su efecto sobre el amor propio: uno se hace menos mala sangre y puede seguir su camino personal con más tranquilidad.

—Sí… de acuerdo… Usted ha empezado bien; tiene la profesión indicada, haciendo el trabajo que considera más idóneo. A algunas personas les falla eso y se arrepienten demasiado tarde. Pero no esté demasiado seguro de conservar su independencia.

—¿Se refiere usted a los lazos familiares? —dijo Lydgate, considerando que quizá supusieran una fuerte atadura en el caso del señor Farebrother.

—No del todo, aunque es cierto que hacen más difíciles muchas cosas. Pero una buena esposa, una mujer buena que sea discreta, puede ayudar de verdad a un hombre y lograr que sea más independiente. Uno de mis feligreses, que es una excelente persona por otra parte, difícilmente hubiera salido adelante como lo ha hecho de no haber sido por su mujer. ¿Conoce usted a los Garth? Me parece que no eran pacientes de Peacock.

—No; pero hay una señorita Garth en casa del viejo Featherstone, en Lowick.

—Su hija: una excelente muchacha.

—Es muy callada… Apenas he reparado en ella.

—Mary en cambio sí que se habrá fijado en usted, puede estar seguro.

—No entiendo —dijo Lydgate, que difícilmente podía responder: «claro».

—Es una chica capaz de calibrar a cualquiera. La preparé para la confirmación… Es una de mis favoritas.

El señor Farebrother fumó unos momentos en silencio, dado que Lydgate no sentía interés por saber nada más acerca de los Garth. Finalmente el vicario dejó la pipa, estiró las piernas y mirando a Lydgate con ojos brillantes y una sonrisa, dijo:

—Pero los habitantes de Middlemarch no somos tan mansos como usted nos cree. Tenemos nuestras intrigas y nuestros partidos. Si vota usted por mí ofenderá a Bulstrode.

—¿De qué se acusa a Bulstrode? —dijo Lydgate, recalcando mucho las palabras.

—Yo no he dicho que se le acuse de nada. Tan solo que, si no vota usted de acuerdo con él, se convertirá en su enemigo.

—No creo que necesite tener eso en cuenta —dijo Lydgate, con tono bastante orgulloso—; pero parece que sus ideas sobre hospitales son buenas y que dedica grandes sumas a obras públicas de utilidad. Podría ayudarme mucho a hacer realidad mis ideas. En cuanto a sus principios religiosos… bien, como dijo Voltaire, los conjuros acaban con un rebaño de ovejas si se administran con cierta cantidad de arsénico. Busco al hombre que proporcione el arsénico; sus conjuros no me interesan en absoluto.

—Muy bien. Pero, en ese caso, no debe ofender a su hombre del arsénico. A mí no me ofenderá, se lo aseguro —dijo el señor Farebrother con gran sencillez—. No convierto mi conveniencia en deberes ajenos. Me opongo a Bulstrode por muchas razones. No me gusta el grupo al que pertenece: son personas ignorantes y estrechas de miras y contribuyen a hacer incómoda la vida de sus vecinos más que a mejorarla. Su sistema es una especie de exclusivismo mundano espiritual: creen de verdad que el resto de la humanidad es un cadáver condenado a la destrucción que tiene como fin darles a ellos de comer para alcanzar el paraíso. Pero —añadió, sonriendo— no digo que el nuevo hospital de Bulstrode sea una cosa mala; y en cuanto a sus deseos de obligarme a abandonar el viejo… bueno, si me considera una persona dañina, no hace más que devolverme el cumplido. Y yo no soy un clérigo modelo… solo una discreta imitación.

Lydgate no estaba nada seguro de que el vicario se calumniara. Un clérigo modelo, como un médico modelo, tenía que considerar su profesión como la mejor del mundo y aceptar todo saber como simple alimento para su patología moral y su terapéutica. De manera que se limitó a decir:

—¿Qué razón da Bulstrode para prescindir de usted?

—Que no enseño sus opiniones… a las que llama religión espiritual; y que siempre ando escaso de tiempo. Las dos afirmaciones son ciertas. Pero el tiempo podría encontrarlo y las cuarenta libras me vendrían francamente bien. Esos son, pura y simplemente, los datos del problema. Pero será mejor que lo dejemos. Solo quería decirle que votar por su hombre del arsénico no le obligará a cortar sus relaciones conmigo. No me puedo permitir el lujo de prescindir de usted, que es algo así como un navegante que ha venido a instalarse entre nosotros después de dar la vuelta al mundo: lo necesito para conservar mi fe en los antípodas. Y ahora cuénteme todo lo que recuerde sobre París.

Capítulo XVIII

> Señor, las esperanzas más excelsas de la tierra
> comparten la suerte de otras inferiores: pechos heroicos,
> respirando aire nocivo, corren el riesgo de sucumbir a la peste;
> o, al faltarles zumo de limón al cruzar el Ecuador,
> consumirse por el escorbuto.

Aún transcurrieron varias semanas antes de que la cuestión de la capellanía adquiriera importancia práctica para Lydgate y, sin explicarse la razón, el joven médico aplazó la decisión sobre a quién daría el voto. Su actitud habría sido de total indiferencia —es decir, habría adoptado la postura más conveniente, votando a favor de Tyke sin la menor vacilación— de no haberle interesado el señor Farebrother de manera personal.

Porque su aprecio por el vicario de St Botolph fue creciendo con el trato. El hecho de que, haciéndose cargo de la situación de Lydgate como recién llegado que ha de atender en primer lugar a sus objetivos profesionales, el señor Farebrother se hubiera esforzado por respetar su libertad de decisión, en lugar de solicitar su apoyo, ponía de manifiesto una delicadeza y generosidad poco comunes, cualidades a las que el joven médico era extraordinariamente sensible por naturaleza. A aquello se unían otros aspectos de la conducta del señor Farebrother totalmente fuera de lo habitual, que hacían de la personalidad del vicario algo semejante a esos paisajes meridionales que parecen divididos entre magnificencia natural y dejadez social. Muy pocos hombres habrían tenido una actitud tan filial y caballerosa hacia su madre, tía y hermana, cuya dependencia del vicario había modelado la vida del señor Farebrother de manera más bien incómoda para él; pocos hombres sometidos a la presión de necesidades insignificantes se habrían mostrado tan noblemente decididos a no disfrazar con pretensiones elevadas sus deseos inevitablemente egoístas. En aquellos asuntos el señor Farebrother no ignoraba que su vida resistiría el escrutinio más minucioso; y tal vez esta seguridad favorecía cierta actitud desafiante hacia la crítica severidad de otras personas cuya intimidad con el empíreo no parecía servir para mejorar sus costumbres privadas, y cuyos fines elevados no guardaban relación alguna con sus acciones. Además, su predicación era ingeniosa y concisa, como la predicación de la Iglesia de Inglaterra en sus mejores épocas, y el señor Farebrother pronunciaba sus sermones sin libro. Personas ajenas a su parroquia iban a oírle; y, puesto que llenar la iglesia de fieles ha sido siempre la parte más difícil de las funciones de un clérigo, eso le proporcionaba otro motivo para un despreocupado sentimiento de superioridad. El señor Farebrother era, además, un hombre simpático: siempre de buen humor, de ingenio rápido, franco, sin sonrisas de disimulada amargura, ni esos otros aderezos de la conversación que convierten a la mitad de los seres humanos en una calamidad para sus amigos. Lydgate se sentía muy a gusto con el vicario y deseaba disfrutar de su amistad.

Dados tales sentimientos, el joven médico siguió postergando la cuestión de la capellanía y trató de convencerse de que no solo no era asunto de su incumbencia, sino de que, con toda probabilidad, nunca llegaría a exigirle la incomodidad del voto. Lydgate, a petición del señor Bulstrode, estaba haciendo planes para la organización interna del hospital, y los dos se veían con frecuencia. El banquero siempre daba por supuesto que podía contar en general con Lydgate como colaborador, pero no mencionó, de manera específica, la próxima elección entre Tyke y Farebrother. Cuando el Consejo General Hospitalario se hubo reunido, sin embargo, y Lydgate advirtió que el asunto de la capellanía estaba incluido en el orden del día de una asamblea de directores y profesionales de la medicina que se celebraría el viernes siguiente, tuvo la molesta sensación de que no le quedaba otro remedio que decidirse sobre aquel insignificante problema de

Middlemarch. No podía evitar oír dentro de sí la tajante afirmación de que Bulstrode era el primer ministro y de que el asunto Tyke significaba para él conseguir un cargo o no conseguirlo; y tampoco podía evitar un sentimiento de profundo desagrado ante la idea de quedarse sin su puesto en el futuro hospital. Porque sus observaciones confirmaban constantemente las palabras del señor Farebrother sobre la actitud del banquero frente a la oposición. «¡Al diablo con su política mezquina!» fue una de sus conclusiones durante el proceso de afeitarse reflexivamente, tres mañanas consecutivas, cuando había empezado a sentir la necesidad de consultar seriamente su conciencia en aquel asunto. Era cierto que se podían presentar argumentos válidos contra la elección del señor Farebrother: se hallaba ya demasiado ocupado, sobre todo teniendo en cuenta la gran cantidad de tiempo que dedicaba a asuntos no eclesiásticos. Existía luego un motivo repetido de desagrado que dificultaba el aprecio de Lydgate: su costumbre de jugar a las cartas por el dinero que ganaba; era cierto que le gustaba jugar, pero también le gustaba el fin que perseguía jugando. El señor Farebrother sostenía en un plano teórico la conveniencia de todos los juegos y decía que el ingenio de los ingleses se había embotado por la falta de ellos; pero Lydgate estaba seguro de que habría jugado mucho menos de no haber sido por el dinero que ganaba. Había una sala de billar en El Dragón Verde, lugar que algunas madres y esposas dadas a la angustia consideraban la peor tentación de Middlemarch. El vicario era un jugador de billar de primera clase y, aunque no frecuentaba El Dragón Verde, se sabía que había estado allí algunas veces (nunca por la noche) y había ganado dinero. En cuanto a la capellanía, el señor Farebrother confesaba con sinceridad que le interesaba únicamente por las cuarenta libras. Lydgate no era un puritano, pero no le agradaba el juego, y ganar dinero con él siempre le había parecido mezquino; además, para su ideal de vida aquel sometimiento de la conducta a la obtención de pequeñas sumas resultaba odioso en extremo. Hasta entonces sus necesidades vitales habían quedado cubiertas sin ninguna molestia para él y su primer impulso era mostrarse siempre liberal con las medias coronas, como materia desprovista de importancia para un caballero, y nunca se le había ocurrido un plan para abastecerse de ellas. Siempre había sabido de forma general que no era rico, pero nunca se había sentido pobre y carecía de capacidad para imaginarse el papel que la falta de dinero desempeña a la hora de decidir el comportamiento de los hombres, porque no había sido nunca motivo de sus acciones. De ahí que no estuviera en condiciones de disculpar aquella búsqueda deliberada de pequeñas ganancias, que le resultaba totalmente repulsiva, por lo que nunca llegó a hacer cálculos sobre la relación entre los ingresos del vicario y sus gastos más o menos necesarios. Es posible que tampoco hubiese hecho semejante cálculo en su propio caso.

Y ahora, cuando se planteaba la cuestión del voto, aquel hecho tan desagradable se volvía contra el señor Farebrother con más fuerza que antes. ¡Sería mucho más fácil tomar decisiones si el carácter de los hombres fuese más firme y especialmente si nuestros amigos fueran siempre idóneos para las funciones que desearan realizar! Lydgate estaba convencido de que, si no hubiera existido ninguna objeción válida contra el señor Farebrother, habría votado por él, sin importarle la opinión de Bulstrode en aquel asunto: no tenía intención de ser vasallo del banquero. Por otro lado, ahí estaba Tyke, un hombre enteramente consagrado a sus tareas clericales, que solo tenía a su cargo una capilla sufragánea en la parroquia de St Peter y disponía de tiempo libre. Nadie tenía nada que alegar contra el señor Tyke, excepto que resultaba insoportable y se sospechaba que era un hipócrita. A decir verdad, desde el punto de vista de Lydgate, Bulstrode estaba plenamente justificado.

Pero en cualquier dirección en la que el joven médico empezara a inclinarse, surgía algo que le hacía dar un respingo y, siendo un hombre orgulloso, le exasperaba bastante tener que dar un respingo. No le agradaba echar a rodar sus más preciadas ilusiones enemistándose con Bulstrode; tampoco le gustaba votar contra Farebrother, ayudando con ello a privarle de empleo y sueldo; y se le planteó la posibilidad de que quizá aquellas cuarenta libras adicionales sirvieran para librar al vicario de la innoble preocupación de tener que ganar dinero jugando a las cartas. Además, a Lydgate tampoco le gustaba la idea de que, al votar por Tyke, iba a hacer lo más conveniente para él. Pero el resultado final ¿estaría verdaderamente de acuerdo con su propia conveniencia? Otras personas lo afirmarían, alegando que buscaba el favor de Bulstrode para convertirse en una persona más importante y subir socialmente. ¿Y qué importancia tenía aquello? Por su parte, Lydgate sabía que, si se hubiera tratado tan solo de sus esperanzas personales, le habría importado un rábano la amistad o enemistad del banquero. Lo que de verdad le preocupaba era conseguir medios para su trabajo, un vehículo para sus ideas; y, después de todo, ¿no estaba obligado a preferir la obtención de un buen hospital, donde podría demostrar las diferencias específicas entre las fiebres y comprobar los resultados terapéuticos, a cualquier otra cosa relacionada con la capellanía? Por vez primera, Lydgate estaba sintiendo la opresión paralizante, como de tela de araña, de los minúsculos condicionamientos sociales y su desconcertante complejidad. Al término de su debate interior, cuando se

puso en camino hacia el hospital, no le quedaba otra esperanza que la posibilidad de que el intercambio de opiniones sacara a la luz algún nuevo aspecto de la cuestión, e inclinara la balanza de manera que resultase innecesario el recurso al voto. Creo que también confiaba un poco en la energía engendrada por las circunstancias: una cálida afluencia de emociones que facilitara la decisión, porque el examen a sangre fría solo había servido para hacerla más difícil. En cualquier caso no se dijo con claridad de qué lado votaría; y todo el tiempo estuvo quejándose en su interior de haberse visto forzado a aceptar aquella dependencia. Antes de producirse le hubiera parecido un ridículo ejemplo de lógica defectuosa que él, con sus inconfundibles deseos de independencia y sus elevadas metas, se encontrara, nada más empezar, obstaculizado por mezquinas alternativas que le resultaban igualmente repugnantes. En su aposento de estudiante había previsto su actividad social de forma muy distinta.

El joven médico se puso en camino con retraso, pero el doctor Sprague, los otros dos médicos y varios de los directores habían llegado pronto; el señor Bulstrode, tesorero y presidente, figuraba entre los que aún seguían ausentes. La conversación parecía implicar que el resultado era problemático, y que la mayoría en favor de Tyke no era tan segura como se había supuesto. Los dos doctores, cosa sorprendente, estaban de acuerdo, o más bien, coincidían a la hora de la acción, aunque tuvieran opiniones distintas. El doctor Sprague, hombre robusto y de peso, era, como todo el mundo había supuesto, partidario del señor Farebrother. Existía la sospecha, casi con calidad de certeza, de que el doctor era un hombre sin religión, pero de alguna forma Middlemarch toleraba en él aquella deficiencia como si se tratase de un lord canciller; incluso es probable que por esta razón su peso profesional resultara más efectivo, ya que la asociación —tan antigua como el mundo— entre la inteligencia y el principio del mal seguía ocupando aún un lugar prominente incluso en el cerebro de las pacientes que tenían las ideas más estrictas sobre la licitud de los adornos y de los sentimientos. Era quizá aquel aspecto negativo del doctor Sprague lo que hacía que sus vecinos lo calificaran de testarudo y lacónico, características que también se consideraban convenientes para el almacenamiento de saberes relacionados con los medicamentos. En cualquier caso es cierto que, si un profesional de la medicina hubiese llegado a Middlemarch con la reputación de tener unas opiniones religiosas muy definidas, de consagrarse a la oración o de manifestar de alguna otra manera una piedad activa, la opinión pública habría puesto en duda su competencia como médico.

Desde este punto de vista era una suerte (profesionalmente hablando) para el doctor Minchin que sus simpatías religiosas fueran de orden muy general y estuvieran en condiciones de dar una distante aprobación médica a cualquier sentimiento serio, tanto dentro de la Iglesia anglicana como entre los disidentes, sin adherirse en concreto a ningún sistema particular de creencias. Si el señor Bulstrode insistía, como era costumbre suya hacerlo, en la doctrina luterana de la justificación, que determina si una Iglesia debe mantenerse o caer, el doctor Minchin, en contrapartida, estaba completamente seguro de que el hombre no era una simple máquina o una fortuita conjunción de átomos; si la señora Wimple insistía en una providencia particular relacionada con sus molestias gástricas, al doctor Minchin le gustaba mantener abiertas las ventanas mentales y poner objeciones a unos límites demasiado fijos; si el cervecero unitario bromeaba acerca del Símbolo Atanasiano, el doctor Minchin citaba el *Ensayo sobre el hombre*, de Alexander Pope. No estaba de acuerdo con las anécdotas de estilo demasiado libre que se permitía el doctor Sprague; prefería las citas aprobadas por la tradición y gustaba del refinamiento en todas sus manifestaciones: era de conocimiento público que tenía cierto grado de parentesco con un obispo y que a veces pasaba las vacaciones «en palacio».

El doctor Minchin era un hombre de manos suaves, tez pálida y perfil redondeado, indistinguible en apariencia de un apacible clérigo; el doctor Sprague, por el contrario, resultaba superfluamente alto; sus pantalones se arrugaban en las rodillas y dejaban ver un exceso de bota en una época en la que sujetar las perneras mediante tiras de tela parecía requisito necesario para lograr la dignidad en el porte; se le oía entrar y salir, subir y bajar, como si hubiera acudido a comprobar el estado de la techumbre. En resumen: tenía peso y cabía esperar que se peleara con una enfermedad y consiguiera derribarla; mientras que el doctor Minchin podía estar más capacitado para descubrirla al acecho y lograr evitarla. Los dos disfrutaban por igual del misterioso privilegio de la reputación médica y ocultaban con mucha cortesía su mutua desconfianza en la habilidad del otro. Dado que se consideraban una institución en Middlemarch, estaban dispuestos a aliarse contra todos los innovadores, así como contra los no profesionales con tendencia a inmiscuirse. Desde esa perspectiva, los dos se oponían de corazón al señor Bulstrode, aunque el doctor Minchin nunca llegaba a manifestar abiertamente su hostilidad y nunca disentía del banquero sin dar una detallada explicación de todo ello a la señora Bulstrode, quien había descubierto que solo el doctor Minchin entendía su constitución. Un profano que husmeaba en el comportamiento profesional de los médicos y estaba siempre introduciendo sus reformas por la fuerza, aunque resultara menos directamente molesto

para los dos doctores que para los médicos que atendían por contrato a los indigentes, ofendía de todas formas su olfato profesional *per se*; y el doctor Minchin coincidía plenamente en el nuevo motivo de animosidad contra Bulstrode, despertada por su aparente determinación de proteger a Lydgate. Los otros dos médicos sin título de doctor, el señor Wrench y el señor Toller, que llevaban muchos años de práctica, se habían apartado un poco en amigable conversación, completamente de acuerdo en que Lydgate era un mequetrefe, hecho a la medida de Bulstrode. Ante sus amigos ajenos a la profesión ya habían coincidido en alabar al joven médico, llegado a la ciudad al retirarse el señor Peacock, sin otra recomendación que sus propios méritos y sin otras razones para considerarle un profesional de solvencia que las que pudieran deducirse de no haber malgastado el tiempo en otras ramas del saber. Estaba claro que Lydgate, al no administrar medicamentos, se proponía desprestigiar a sus colegas y al mismo tiempo oscurecer los límites entre su rango profesional y el de los doctores, quienes, en interés de la medicina, se sentían obligados a mantener la separación. Especialmente contra un hombre que no había frecuentado ninguna de las dos universidades inglesas ni realizado en ellas estudios anatómicos y clínicos, pero que se presentaba en cambio con la denigrante presunción de haber adquirido experiencia en Edimburgo y en París, donde quizá la observación clínica fuese abundante pero difícilmente correcta.

Sucedió así que en aquella ocasión se identificó a Bulstrode con Lydgate, y a Lydgate con Tyke; y debido a aquella diversidad de nombres intercambiables en el asunto de la capellanía, varias personas llegaron a la misma conclusión sobre la manera de resolverlo.

El doctor Sprague, nada más entrar, dijo bruscamente al grupo allí reunido:

—Yo estoy por Farebrother. ¿Un salario? Totalmente de acuerdo. Pero ¿por qué quitárselo al vicario? No anda sobrado de dinero… Necesita un seguro de vida, además de mantener casa y hacer los actos de caridad que corresponden a un vicario. Pónganle cuarenta libras en el bolsillo y no habrán hecho nada malo. Farebrother es una excelente persona, de eso no hay la menor duda, y tiene solo la apariencia de párroco imprescindible para que se autorizara su ordenación.

—¡Jo, jo! —intervino el anciano señor Powderell, un quincallero retirado de cierta categoría, con una entonación a medio camino entre la risa y la censura parlamentaria—. Hemos de permitirle que exprese su opinión, doctor. Pero lo que tenemos que considerar no son los ingresos de nadie: son las almas de los enfermos pobres. —Aquí la voz y el rostro del señor Powderell adquirieron un sincero patetismo—. El señor Tyke es un auténtico predicador del Evangelio. Votaría contra mi conciencia si votara contra el señor Tyke, no me cabe la menor duda.

—Las personas que se oponen al señor Tyke no han pedido que nadie vote contra su conciencia, según creo —dijo el señor Hackbutt, un acaudalado curtidor de palabra fácil, cuyas gafas resplandecientes y erizados cabellos se habían vuelto con cierta severidad hacia el inocente señor Powderell—. Pero a juicio mío es de nuestra incumbencia, como directores, considerar si toda nuestra tarea consiste en llevar a cabo propuestas que emanan de una sola fuente. ¿Acaso algún miembro del comité afirmará que habría siquiera acariciado la idea de desplazar al caballero que ha desempeñado siempre la función de capellán si no le hubiese sido sugerida por personas que juzgan las instituciones de esta ciudad como otros tantos instrumentos para imponer su voluntad? No censuro los motivos de nadie: quede eso entre su conciencia y un Poder más alto; pero sí afirmo que están en juego influencias incompatibles con una auténtica independencia, y que un rastrero servilismo es habitualmente consecuencia de circunstancias que los caballeros que así se comportan no están en condiciones de reconocer ni desde el punto de vista moral ni desde el financiero. Yo no soy más que un profano, pero he dedicado considerable atención a las divisiones de la Iglesia y…

—¡Al diablo con las divisiones! —intervino el señor Frank Hawley, abogado y secretario del ayuntamiento, que rara vez estaba presente en las reuniones, pero que hizo su aparición con gesto apresurado y una fusta en la mano—. Nada tenemos aquí que ver con eso. Farebrother ha estado haciendo ese trabajo, el que había, sin cobrar, y si hay que pagarlo debe dársele a él. Yo digo que es una vergüenza quitárselo a Farebrother.

—Creo que tampoco estaría de más, entre caballeros, evitar afirmaciones con un cariz tan personal —dijo el señor Plymdale—. Yo votaré por el señor Tyke, pero habría seguido en la ignorancia, de no haberlo apuntado el señor Hackbutt, de mi condición de persona rastrera y servil.

—Niego haber hecho alusiones personales. He manifestado expresamente, si se me permite repetirlo, o más bien completar lo que estaba diciendo…

—¡Vaya, aquí está Minchin! —dijo el señor Frank Hawley; con lo que todo el mundo se apartó del señor Hackbutt, permitiéndole comprobar de nuevo la inutilidad de un talento superior en una ciudad como Middlemarch—. Espero contar con usted del lado de la razón, ¿no es cierto?

—Así lo espero —dijo el doctor Minchin, moviendo la cabeza en gesto afirmativo y estrechando manos aquí y allá—. Por mucho que sufran mis sentimientos.

—Si existe un problema de sentimientos heridos, será por el hombre a quien se quiere despedir, imagino —dijo el señor Frank Hawley.

—Confieso que también me preocupa el otro lado. Mi aprecio se halla dividido —explicó el doctor Minchin, frotándose las manos—. Considero al señor Tyke un hombre ejemplar, intachable, y creo que los motivos de que se lo haya propuesto son perfectamente legítimos. Por mi parte, me gustaría mucho darle mi voto. Pero me veo obligado a adoptar un punto de vista que en este caso da preferencia a los derechos del señor Farebrother. Es un hombre encantador, un predicador competente y lleva más tiempo entre nosotros.

El anciano señor Powderell se le quedó mirando en silencio y con expresión entristecida. El señor Plymdale se arregló la corbata, incómodo.

—Confío en que no querrá usted ponernos a Farebrother como ejemplo de lo que debe ser un clérigo —dijo el señor Larcher, el eminente transportista, que acababa de llegar—. No le tengo mala voluntad, pero creo que debemos algo a la opinión pública, para no hablar de instancias más altas, a la hora de considerar estos nombramientos. En mi opinión Farebrother tiene demasiada manga ancha. No quiero hacer ninguna acusación en concreto, pero estoy seguro de que dedicaría a esa tarea el mínimo tiempo posible.

—Lo que, ¡por todos los demonios!, sería siempre cien mil veces mejor que dedicarle demasiado —dijo el señor Hawley, cuya mala lengua era de sobra conocida en aquella parte del condado—. Las personas enfermas no soportan tantas oraciones y sermones. Y esas prácticas metodistas son perjudiciales para el espíritu… malas para el interior del cuerpo, ¿no es verdad? —añadió, volviéndose rápidamente hacia los cuatro profesionales de la medicina allí reunidos.

Pero no hubo necesidad de dar respuesta alguna a esta pregunta gracias a la aparición de tres caballeros, con quienes se intercambiaron saludos más o menos cordiales. Se trataba del reverendo Edward Thesiger, rector de St Peter, del señor Bulstrode y de nuestro amigo el señor Brooke, de Tipton Grange, que había permitido recientemente, al llegarle el turno, que se le incluyera en el consejo de directores, pero que no había asistido nunca a las reuniones; su presencia en esta ocasión se debía a la insistencia del señor Bulstrode. Tan solo faltaba Lydgate.

Todo el mundo procedió a sentarse, bajo la presidencia del señor Bulstrode, tan pálido y circunspecto como de costumbre. El señor Thesiger, persona de moderadas convicciones evangélicas, deseaba el nombramiento de su amigo el señor Tyke, un hombre celoso y competente que, teniendo a su cargo una capilla sufragánea, con una cura de almas no muy extensa, disponía de tiempo suficiente para aquella nueva tarea. Era deseable que la actitud de los titulares de aquel tipo de capellanías fuese fervorosa: existían en ellas peculiares oportunidades para influir espiritualmente; y aunque estaba bien que fuesen remuneradas, eso hacía aún más necesario mantener una escrupulosa vigilancia para que el cargo no se convirtiera en simple prebenda. Los modales del señor Thesiger eran de tan tranquila dignidad que sus opositores solo podían manifestar su disconformidad con el silencio.

El señor Brooke creía que en aquel asunto todo el mundo estaba lleno de buenas intenciones. Personalmente no se había ocupado nunca de la marcha del viejo hospital, aunque sentía gran interés por todo lo que se hiciera en beneficio de Middlemarch y estaba dispuesto a tomar parte en cualquier reunión en que se debatiera una cuestión de interés público: «cualquier asunto público», repetía el señor Brooke, con su inclinación de cabeza indicativa de que lo entendía todo perfectamente.

—Estoy muy ocupado con mis tareas de magistrado y con el acopio de pruebas documentales, pero considero que mi tiempo está a disposición de mis conciudadanos y, en resumen, mis amigos me han convencido de que un capellán con un sueldo (un sueldo, dense cuenta) es una cosa excelente y estoy muy contento de haber venido aquí y de votar por el señor Tyke, que, por lo que tengo entendido, es un hombre sin tacha, apostólico y elocuente y todas esas cosas… Y yo soy la última persona que le regatearía el voto, dadas las circunstancias, ¿se dan cuenta?

—A mí me parece que le han llenado la cabeza con un solo lado del problema, señor Brooke —dijo el señor Frank Hawley, un *tory* que no tenía miedo de nadie y siempre sospechaba la existencia de intenciones electoralistas—. Parece que no está usted al tanto de que uno de los hombres más valiosos con que contamos ha estado desempeñando las funciones de capellán sin recibir pago alguno y que se propone al señor Tyke para sustituirlo.

—Perdóneme, señor Hawley —dijo el señor Bulstrode—. El señor Brooke ha sido ampliamente informado sobre la personalidad y posición del señor Farebrother.

—Por sus enemigos —estalló el señor Hawley.

—Confío en que no nos encontremos aquí ante un caso de hostilidad personal —dijo el señor Thesiger.

—Pues yo juraría en cambio que se trata precisamente de eso —replicó el señor Hawley.

—Caballeros —dijo el señor Bulstrode con tono apaciguador—, las circunstancias de este asunto pueden exponerse con la mayor brevedad y, si entre los presentes hay quien dude de que alguno de los que van a votar ha sido convenientemente informado, puedo recapitular ahora las consideraciones que podrían influir en ambos lados.

—No veo que eso sirva para nada —dijo el señor Hawley—. Supongo que todos sabemos por quién vamos a votar. Quien desea hacer justicia no espera hasta el último momento para oír a las dos partes interesadas. No tengo tiempo que perder y propongo que este asunto se someta a votación de inmediato.

Una breve pero todavía acalorada discusión se produjo antes de que cada uno de los presentes escribiera «Tyke» o «Farebrother» en un trozo de papel y lo introdujera en un vaso de cristal; y entre tanto el señor Bulstrode vio entrar a Lydgate.

—Veo que los votos están repartidos por igual hasta el momento —dijo el señor Bulstrode con voz clara y penetrante. Luego, mirando a Lydgate—: Hay un voto decisivo todavía pendiente. Es el suyo, señor Lydgate. ¿Tendría usted la amabilidad de ponerlo por escrito?

—Entonces ya está decidido —dijo el señor Wrench, levantándose—. Todos sabemos cómo va a votar el señor Lydgate.

—Parece dar usted un sentido peculiar a esas palabras, señor mío —dijo Lydgate, con aire más bien desafiante y el lápiz suspendido sobre el papel.

—Solo quería decir que se espera que vote usted como el señor Bulstrode. ¿Le parece que eso tiene algo de ofensivo?

—Puede que sea ofensivo para otros. Pero yo no voy a desistir de votar como él por ese motivo.

Lydgate escribió inmediatamente «Tyke».

De manera que el reverendo Walter Tyke se convirtió en capellán del hospital y Lydgate siguió trabajando con el señor Bulstrode. El joven médico no estaba en realidad seguro de que Tyke no fuese el candidato más idóneo y, sin embargo, su conciencia le decía que se habría visto completamente libre de influencias indirectas si hubiese votado al señor Farebrother. El asunto de la capellanía dejó un punto doloroso en su memoria que ponía de manifiesto cómo el ambiente mezquino de Middlemarch había resultado demasiado arduo para él. ¿Es que alguien podía sentirse satisfecho teniendo que decidir entre tales alternativas y en semejantes circunstancias? Tan escasa satisfacción como en el caso de su sombrero, que habría elegido entre los modelos que le ofrecían las posibilidades de la época, usándolo en el mejor de los casos con una resignación que encontraba su apoyo más firme en la comparación con el que llevaban los demás.

Pero el señor Farebrother siguió tratándolo con la misma amabilidad que antes. La personalidad del publicano y pecador no resulta siempre incompatible en la práctica con la del moderno fariseo, porque la mayoría de nosotros apenas vemos con mayor claridad los fallos de nuestra conducta que la incoherencia de nuestros razonamientos o la sosería de nuestros chistes. El vicario de St Botolph, en cambio, carecía sin duda hasta de la más mínima huella de fariseísmo y, a fuerza de reconocer para su fuero interno que se parecía demasiado a los demás hombres, había logrado diferenciarse notablemente de ellos por su capacidad para excusar a los otros cuando lo menospreciaban, y para juzgar imparcialmente su conducta incluso cuando las consecuencias iban en perjuicio suyo.

—El mundo me ha resultado demasiado indigesto, lo sé muy bien —le dijo un día a Lydgate—. Pero también es cierto que yo no soy un hombre de grandes energías. La elección de Hércules es una hermosa fábula; pero Pródico[50] hace que al héroe todo le resulte más fácil, como si bastara con la primera resolución. Otra historia dice que llegó a empuñar la rueca y que finalmente se vistió con la camisa de Nessus. Imagino que una decisión acertada puede mantener a un hombre en el buen camino si le ayudan las de los demás.

La charla del vicario no siempre resultaba inspiradora: había evitado ser fariseo, pero no escapaba a esa valoración de nuestras posibilidades a la que llegamos con precipitación, como si la hubiéramos deducido de nuestro propio fracaso. Lydgate decidió que existía una deplorable enfermedad de la voluntad en el señor Farebrother.

Capítulo XIX

L'altra vedete ch'ha fatto alla guancia
della sua palma, sospirando, letto.[51]

Purgatorio, VII

Cuando Jorge IV todavía reinaba sobre las intimidades de Windsor, el duque de Wellington era primer ministro y el señor Vincy alcalde del antiguo ayuntamiento de Middlemarch, la señora Casaubon, Dorothea Brooke de soltera, pasaba su luna de miel en Roma. En aquellos días el mundo en general era cuarenta años más ignorante del bien y del mal que en el momento presente. Con frecuencia los viajeros sabían muy poco de arte cristiano y carecían además de fuentes de información; e incluso el más brillante de los críticos ingleses del momento confundía la tumba florecida de la Virgen ascendida al cielo con un jarrón ornamental creado por la fantasía del pintor. El romanticismo, que ha contribuido después a llenar algunos tediosos vacíos con amor y sabiduría, no había logrado aún marcar la época con su fermento, incorporándose a la dieta de todo el mundo; todavía se hallaba en proceso de maduración y era reconocible en el vigoroso entusiasmo de ciertos artistas alemanes de largos cabellos[52] que vivían en Roma, por lo que tan solo la juventud de otras naciones que trabajaba o vivía ociosa a su lado quedaba a veces cautivada por aquel movimiento en progresión.

Una hermosa mañana, un joven de cabellos no demasiado largos, pero abundantes y rizados, y reconocible como inglés por el resto de su indumentaria, se detuvo, cuando acababa de dar la espalda al Torso del Belvedere en el Vaticano, a contemplar la magnífica vista de las montañas desde la galería circular contigua, quedándose tan absorto que no advirtió cómo se le acercaba un alemán de ojos oscuros y lleno de animación que, después de ponerle una mano en el hombro, le dijo con fuerte acento:

—¡Ven, deprisa! De lo contrario habrá cambiado de postura.

La rapidez respondió en el acto a la llamada, y las dos figuras cruzaron a buen paso ante la estatua de Meleagro en dirección a la galería donde Ariadna dormida, conocida por entonces como la Cleopatra, yace en la marmórea voluptuosidad de su belleza, con la túnica plegándose a su alrededor con la ternura y la sencillez de los pétalos de una flor. Llegaron justo a tiempo de ver a otra figura junto a un pedestal cercano a la estatua dormida: una muchacha de carne y hueso, cuya figura, comparable a la de Ariadna, se hallaba cubierta por un ropaje gris de aspecto cuáquero; su larga capa, abrochada al cuello, quedaba abierta más abajo, dejando los brazos al descubierto, y una hermosa mano desenguantada servía de almohada a la mejilla, empujando de algún modo hacia atrás el gorro blanco de castor que, en torno al cabello oscuro, austeramente trenzado, le creaba una especie de halo para el rostro.

La muchacha no estaba contemplando la escultura y probablemente tampoco pensaba en ella: sus grandes ojos se hallaban fijos, ensoñadoramente, en una mancha de sol que cruzaba el suelo. Pero en seguida tomó conciencia de los dos desconocidos (que hicieron una pausa repentina como para contemplar la estatua de Cleopatra) y, sin mirarlos, se dio la vuelta de inmediato para reunirse con la criada y el guía que remoloneaban en la galería a unos metros de distancia.

—¿Qué te ha parecido como ejemplo de antítesis? —dijo el alemán, buscando en el rostro de su amigo el esperado gesto de admiración, pero reanudando en seguida el rápido flujo de palabras sin aguardar respuesta—. Ahí yace la belleza antigua, sin aspecto de cadáver ni siquiera en la muerte, tan solo detenida en la satisfacción completa de su perfección sensual; y aquí se alza la belleza respirando vida, con la

conciencia de siglos de cristianismo en el pecho. Pero debería ir vestida de monja; creo que tiene casi el aspecto de lo que vosotros llamáis un cuáquero y yo la vestiría de monja en mi cuadro. Está casada, sin embargo; he visto el anillo de boda en esa maravillosa mano izquierda, de lo contrario habría pensado que el pálido *Geistlicher*[53] era su padre. Lo vi despedirse de ella hace un buen rato, pero ha sido ahora cuando la he encontrado en esa pose magnífica. ¡Piensa un poco! Quizá sea rico y le guste que retraten a su mujer. ¡Ah! ¡Ya no podemos seguir ocupándonos de ella! ¡Se marcha! ¡Sigámosla hasta su casa!

—No, no —dijo su acompañante, frunciendo un poco el entrecejo.

—Eres una persona extraña, Ladislaw. Pareces impresionado. ¿Acaso la conoces?

—Sé que está casada con mi primo —dijo Will Ladislaw, avanzando por la galería con aire preocupado, mientras el alemán seguía a su lado y lo contemplaba con interés.

—¡Cómo! ¿El *Geistlicher*? Tiene más bien aspecto de tío… un parentesco bastante más útil.

—No es mi tío. Ya te he dicho que es primo segundo —dijo Ladislaw, un tanto irritado.

—*Schön, schön*[54]. No te lo tomes a mal. ¿No estarás enfadado conmigo por pensar que la mujer de tu primo segundo es la *madonna* joven más perfecta que he visto nunca?

—¿Enfadado? ¡Qué tontería! Solo la he visto una vez, un par de minutos, cuando mi primo me la presentó, inmediatamente antes de abandonar yo Inglaterra. Aún no se habían casado. No estaba al tanto de que fuesen a venir a Roma.

—Pero ahora irás a verlos… averiguarás su dirección… puesto que sabes cómo se llaman. ¿Te parece que vayamos a correos? Y podrías hablarles del retrato.

—¡Vete al infierno, Naumann! No sé lo que voy a hacer. No soy tan desvergonzado como tú.

—¡Bah! Eso se debe a que eres un diletante y un *amateur*. Si fueras un artista, pensarías en la mujer de tu primo segundo como forma antigua animada por un sentimiento cristiano, una especie de Antígona cristiana: fuerza sensual controlada por pasión espiritual.

—Sí, y debería también pensar que tu cuadro ha de ser la finalidad básica de su existencia: la divinidad realizándose por completo y quedando casi exhausta en el acto de cubrir tu trozo de lienzo. Seré *amateur*, si así lo quieres, pero no creo que todo el universo se esfuerce por contribuir al oscuro significado de tus cuadros.

—¡Pues es eso lo que hace, amigo mío!… Hasta ahora se esfuerza a través de mí, Adolf Naumann: de eso no cabe la menor duda —dijo el bondadoso pintor, poniendo una mano en el hombro de Ladislaw y sin inmutarse en absoluto por el inexplicable toque de mal humor en las palabras de Will—. ¡Veamos! Mi existencia presupone la existencia de todo el universo, ¿no es así?, y mi función es pintar… y como pintor tengo una concepción que es completamente *genialisch* de tu tía abuela o abuela segunda como tema para un cuadro; por consiguiente, el universo se esfuerza por realizar ese cuadro mediante el particular gancho o zarpa que extiende hacia adelante y que tiene mi forma, ¿no es cierto?

—Pero ¿qué sucede si hay otra zarpa con mi forma que se esfuerza por impedirlo?… Entonces el caso es un poco menos simple.

—En absoluto: el resultado de la confrontación es la misma cosa, cuadro o no cuadro, lógicamente.

Will no pudo resistir tanto buen humor imperturbable y el nubarrón de su rostro dio paso a una risueña carcajada.

—Entonces, amigo mío, ¿me ayudarás? —dijo el pintor, con tono esperanzado.

—¡No digas tonterías, Naumann! Las damas inglesas no están al servicio de todo el mundo como modelos. Y tú quieres expresar demasiado con tus cuadros. Solo harías un retrato mejor o peor, con un fondo para el que cada experto daría una razón diferente a favor o en contra. Y ¿qué es un retrato de mujer? Tu pintura y tu escultura son cosas de poco valor después de todo. Perturban y quitan fuerza a las ideas en lugar de elevarlas. La palabra es un medio mucho más adecuado.

—Sí, para quienes no saben pintar —dijo Naumann—. Ahí estás totalmente en lo cierto. Yo no te he recomendado que pintes, amigo mío.

El amable artista sabía usar el aguijón, pero Ladislaw prefirió no darse por picado. Siguió hablando como si no hubiera oído el comentario.

—La palabra da una imagen más plena, que tiene mayores ventajas precisamente por su vaguedad. Después de todo, la verdadera visión es interior; y la pintura nos ofrece con insistencia la imperfección. Eso lo noto especialmente cuando representas mujeres. ¡Como si una mujer fuera una simple superficie coloreada! Hay que esperar a que aparezcan el movimiento y las inflexiones. Existe una diferencia en su manera misma de respirar: cambia de un momento a otro… Esa mujer que acabas de ver, por ejemplo: ¿cómo pintarías su voz, me lo puedes decir? Y, sin embargo, su voz es mucho más hermosa que todo lo que has visto de ella.

—Ya entiendo, ya entiendo, estás celoso. Ningún hombre debe atreverse a pensar que es capaz de pintar tu ideal. ¡Esto es una cosa muy seria, amigo mío! ¡Tu tía abuela! ¡*Der Neffe als Onkel* en un sentido trágico… *ungeheuer*![55]

—Tú y yo vamos a enfadarnos, Naumann, si vuelves a llamar tía mía a esa dama.

—¿Cómo se la debe llamar entonces?

—Señora Casaubon.

—Bien. Supongamos que llego a conocerla a pesar tuyo y descubro que tiene grandes deseos de retratarse.

—¡Supongamos! —dijo Will Ladislaw, con tono despectivo, destinado a poner fin a aquella conversación. Era consciente de irritarse por motivos absurdos, creación suya a medias. ¿Por qué estaba haciendo tantas alharacas por culpa de la señora Casaubon? Y, sin embargo, Will sentía como si le hubiera sucedido algo. Hay caracteres que crean continuamente colisiones y enredos en dramas en los que nadie está dispuesto a actuar con ellos. Sus susceptibilidades se estrellan contra objetos que permanecen inocentemente en reposo.

Capítulo xx

Una niña abandonada, que se despierta de repente,
contempla asustada lo que tiene en derredor,
y solo descubre que no ve
salirle al encuentro los ojos del amor.

Dos horas más tarde, Dorothea estaba sentada en una habitación interior, o *boudoir*, de un agradable apartamento de Via Sistina.

Siento tener que añadir que sollozaba con amargura, con todo el abandono a ese desahogo del corazón que una mujer controlada de ordinario por el amor propio y la consideración a los demás se permite a veces cuando se considera suficientemente aislada. Y era seguro que el señor Casaubon seguiría aún durante algún tiempo en el Vaticano.

Dorothea, sin embargo, carecía de un motivo de queja que pudiera formular con claridad incluso ante sí misma; y en medio de sus confusas ideas y sentimientos, lo que pugnaba por definirse era el grito acusador de que la desolación que sentía era consecuencia de su propia pobreza espiritual. Se había casado con el hombre de su elección y había contado, frente a la mayoría de las muchachas, con la ventaja de considerar sobre todo el matrimonio como punto de partida de nuevos deberes: desde el primer momento pensó que el señor Casaubon poseía una inteligencia tan por encima de la suya que se vería requerido con frecuencia por estudios que ella no estaría en condiciones de compartir; además, después de la breve y limitada experiencia de su adolescencia, se hallaba de nuevo en Roma, la ciudad en la que la historia se hace visible, donde el pasado de todo un hemisferio parece moverse en procesión funeraria con extrañas imágenes ancestrales y trofeos venidos de muy lejos.

Pero aquella prodigiosa diversidad aumentaba la extraña irrealidad de su vida de casada. Dorothea llevaba cinco semanas en Roma y, en las amables mañanas en que el otoño y el invierno parecen ir cogidos de la mano como una pareja de ancianos felices, aunque muy pronto uno de ellos tenga que seguir viviendo en estremecedora soledad, había recorrido la Ciudad Eterna, al principio con el señor Casaubon, pero sobre todo, en los últimos tiempos, con Tantripp y un guía experimentado. Había visitado las mejores galerías, le habían mostrado las mejores perspectivas, las ruinas más monumentales y las iglesias más hermosas, y al final terminaba por salir casi siempre a pasear por el campo, donde podía sentirse sola con la tierra y el cielo, lejos del opresivo baile de máscaras de las edades, en el que también su vida parecía convertirse en figura enmascarada de enigmáticas vestiduras.

Para quienes contemplan Roma con la fuerza estimulante de un conocimiento que dota de alma a todas las formas históricas y descubre las ocultas transiciones que unen todos los contrastes, la Ciudad Eterna puede ser aún el centro espiritual y el intérprete del mundo. Pero imaginemos un contraste histórico más: las gigantescas y fragmentadas revelaciones de aquella ciudad imperial y papal, arrojadas bruscamente sobre las ideas de una muchacha educada en el puritanismo inglés y suizo, alimentada con entecas historias protestantes y con un arte como el utilizado para decorar biombos; una muchacha cuya naturaleza ardiente convertía su reducido bagaje de conocimientos en principios morales, fundiendo sus acciones en ese molde, y cuyas bruscas emociones añadían a las cosas más abstractas una carga de placer o de sufrimiento; una muchacha recientemente transformada en esposa y que ha pasado de la aceptación entusiasta de unos deberes todavía desconocidos a encontrarse sumergida en un agitado debate interior sobre su destino personal. El peso de una Roma ininteligible puede resultar liviano en el caso de unas ninfas radiantes para

quienes la Ciudad Eterna solo sirva de fondo a la deslumbrante vida social de los ingleses y de los extranjeros en general; pero Dorothea no contaba con semejante defensa ante las impresiones profundas. Ruinas y basílicas, palacios y colosos situados en el centro de un presente sórdido, donde todo lo que estaba vivo y tenía sangre tibia parecía hundido en la profunda degeneración de unas creencias supersticiosas desprovistas de sentido reverencial; la vida titánica, más débil pero apasionada, que la contemplaba, entre forcejeos, desde paredes y techos; las largas hileras de figuras blancas cuyos ojos de mármol parecían encerrar la monótona luz de un mundo desconocido: todo este vasto naufragio de ambiciosos ideales, sensuales y espirituales, confusamente mezclados con los signos del olvido y de la degradación, le produjeron al principio el efecto de una descarga eléctrica y luego se le impusieron con el dolor que corresponde a un hartazgo de ideas confusas que detienen el flujo de la emoción. Formas pálidas y a la vez resplandecientes tomaron posesión de su sensibilidad joven y quedaron fijas en su memoria, apareciendo incluso cuando no pensaba en ellas, preparando extrañas asociaciones que siguieron produciéndose en años posteriores. Nuestros estados de ánimo pueden traer consigo imágenes que se suceden unas a otras igual que las escenas, como de linterna mágica, de un sueño poco profundo; y, durante el resto de su vida, en ciertos momentos de desolación, Dorothea continuó viendo con la imaginación la inmensidad de San Pedro, el enorme baldaquino de bronce, la apasionada expresividad de las actitudes y vestiduras de los profetas y evangelistas de los mosaicos y, extendiéndose por todas partes como una enfermedad de la retina, los paños rojos que se colgaban para celebrar la Navidad.

Y no es que este desconcierto interior de Dorothea tuviese nada de verdaderamente excepcional: muchas almas enfermas de desamparo juvenil caen en la incongruencia y tienen que encontrar por sí mismas un nuevo equilibrio mientras sus mayores se dedican a sus asuntos. Tampoco voy a suponer que por encontrarla llorando a lágrima viva su situación se considere trágica. Es frecuente cierto desánimo, cierto encogimiento del corazón ante la concreción de un futuro real que sustituye al imaginario, y no esperamos que nadie se sienta profundamente conmovido por lo que es frecuente. Ese elemento de tragedia ligado al hecho mismo de la repetición no forma parte aún de las emociones más ordinarias de la humanidad; y es posible que nuestro organismo no lo soportase en dosis abundantes. Si percibiéramos y sintiésemos con intensidad la vida humana ordinaria en su conjunto, sería como si oyéramos crecer la hierba y los latidos del corazón de una ardilla, y moriríamos de ese rugido que se esconde al otro lado del silencio. Tal como están las cosas, el más perceptivo de nosotros camina por el mundo bien protegido por la estupidez.

Sin embargo, Dorothea estaba llorando y, si se le hubiera pedido que explicase el motivo, solo habría podido hacerlo recurriendo a las mismas afirmaciones generales que yo he usado; pedirle mayor concreción habría sido como tratar de contar la historia de las luces y las sombras; porque el futuro real que estaba reemplazando al imaginario extraía sus materiales de las inacabables minucias por las que su opinión sobre el señor Casaubon y su relación conyugal, ahora que ya estaba casada con él, iba modificándose gradualmente, en relación a sus sueños de soltera, con el imperceptible movimiento de la manecilla horaria de un reloj. Todavía era demasiado pronto para que tomara conciencia plena o, por lo menos, para que admitiera el cambio, y aún más para que hubiese reorientado su necesidad de dedicación, algo que, casi con toda seguridad, por ser una parte tan necesaria de su vida mental, antes o después terminaría por sucederle. La rebelión permanente, el desorden de una vida sin algún propósito que sea manifestación de amor y reverencia, era una imposibilidad para Dorothea; pero ahora se encontraba en un momento de espera en el que la energía misma de su carácter agudizaba la confusión. De esa manera, los primeros meses de matrimonio son a menudo tiempos de oleaje (ya se trate de una pequeña cala junto a la orilla o de aguas más profundas) que posteriormente se transforma en agradable bonanza.

Pero ¿no era el señor Casaubon tan sabio como antes? ¿Habían cambiado sus formas de expresión o eran sus sentimientos menos dignos de alabanza? ¡Oh, caprichos de la feminidad! ¿Es que le fallaba la cronología o incluso la capacidad para enunciar no solo una teoría, sino los nombres de quienes la sostenían, o para enumerar las distintas partes de un tema si se le solicitaba? ¿Y no era Roma el lugar más indicado del mundo para dar rienda suelta a todos aquellos talentos? Además, ¿no se había nutrido el entusiasmo de Dorothea sobre todo con la perspectiva de aliviar el peso y quizá la tristeza que las grandes tareas imponen a aquel que las realiza? Porque ahora resultaba aún más evidente que ese peso oprimía al señor Casaubon.

Todas esas preguntas son abrumadoras; pero aunque el resto de las cosas continuase igual, la luz había cambiado, y ya no era posible hallar las nacaradas tonalidades del alba a las doce del mediodía. Es un hecho incontrovertible que un ser humano cuyo carácter se conoce tan solo a través de sus breves entradas y salidas durante unas pocas semanas vividas con la imaginación, a las que se da el nombre de noviazgo, puede revelarse, cuando se le ve con la continuidad que proporciona la relación matrimonial, como mejor o peor de lo que se había supuesto, pero en ningún caso exactamente igual. Y sería asombroso descubrir cuán

pronto se percibe el cambio si no nos enfrentáramos de continuo con otras transformaciones similares. Compartir la misma vivienda con un brillante contertulio o ver a nuestro político favorito en su ministerio puede producir cambios igualmente rápidos; también en esos casos empezamos sabiendo poco y creyendo mucho, y a veces terminamos invirtiendo las proporciones.

Tales comparaciones podrían resultar, sin embargo, engañosas, porque no existía hombre más incapaz de una simulación brillante que el señor Casaubon; su manera de ser era tan ajena al fingimiento como la de cualquier rumiante, y no había colaborado activamente a crear ninguna ilusión acerca de sí mismo. ¿Cómo era posible que en las semanas transcurridas desde la boda, Dorothea, sin advertirlo con claridad, sintiera, con sofocante melancolía, que las amplias perspectivas y las brisas refrescantes que había soñado encontrar en la mente de su marido quedaban reemplazadas por antecámaras y pasillos llenos de recodos que parecían no conducir a ningún sitio? Supongo que era porque durante el noviazgo todo se ve como provisional y preliminar y la más pequeña muestra de virtud o talento parece garantizar maravillosas reservas que los amplios ocios del matrimonio servirán para revelar. Pero una vez que se cruza el umbral del nuevo estado, las esperanzas se concentran en el presente. Una vez embarcados en el viaje marital, es imposible no darse cuenta de que no se avanza y de que seguimos sin ver el mar… de que, en realidad, lo que estamos explorando no es más que un estanque.

En sus conversaciones anteriores a la boda, el señor Casaubon se había extendido con frecuencia en alguna explicación o detalle discutible cuya importancia Dorothea no lograba ver; pero aquella falta de coherencia parecía deberse al carácter fragmentario de sus relaciones, y, animada por su fe en el futuro, la señorita Brooke había escuchado con paciencia fervorosa una enumeración de posibles argumentos contra la nueva teoría del señor Casaubon acerca del dios filisteo Dagon y otras divinidades acuáticas, pensando que de allí en adelante debía ver este asunto, que afectaba de manera tan directa a su prometido, desde la misma elevada perspectiva gracias a la cual, sin duda, había llegado a ser tan importante para él. Del mismo modo, las frases rutinarias y el tono de absoluto desinterés con que trataba ideas más sugerentes se explicaban con facilidad por la atmósfera de premura y preocupación que ya había compartido durante el noviazgo. Pero ahora, desde que habían llegado a Roma, con sus emociones más profundas en tumultuosa actividad, y con la vida convertida en un problema nuevo por la aparición de nuevos elementos, Dorothea se percataba, con cierto terror, de que su espíritu caía a cada paso en ataques interiorizados de rabia y de repulsión o, de lo contrario, en desesperanzada lasitud. Hasta qué punto el juicioso Hooker o cualquier otro héroe de la erudición se hubiera comportado de la misma manera a la edad del señor Casaubon, era algo que ella no tenía medios de saber, por lo que su marido no podía disfrutar de las ventajas de la comparación; pero la forma en que comentaba los objetos extrañamente grandiosos que hallaban a su alrededor había empezado a producir en Dorothea una especie de escalofrío mental: quizá el señor Casaubon tenía el sincero deseo de cumplir dignamente con su deber, pero solo de cumplir con su deber. Lo que se presentaba lleno de lozanía ante la mente de Dorothea estaba ya gastado para su marido; y la capacidad para pensar y para sentir, estimulada alguna vez en él por la vida de la humanidad en general, había quedado reducida desde hacía mucho tiempo a una especie de preparación histológica, a unos conocimientos embalsamados y exangües.

Cuando Casaubon decía: «¿Te interesa esto, Dorothea? ¿Quieres que nos quedemos un poco más? No tengo inconveniente si así lo deseas», a ella le parecía que tanto irse como quedarse eran dos posibilidades igualmente terribles. O: «¿Te gustaría ir a la Farnesina, Dorothea? Hay en ella frescos dibujados o pintados por Rafael de gran celebridad que la mayoría de la gente considera dignos de ser visitados».

—Pero ¿a ti te interesan? —era siempre la pregunta de Dorothea.

—Creo que gozan de gran estimación. Algunos de ellos representan la fábula de Cupido y Psique, que no es probablemente más que la invención romántica de un período literario y no se puede considerar, según creo, como verdadero producto mítico. Pero si te gustan esas pinturas murales no nos cuesta ningún trabajo ir en coche a verlas; y así habrás visto las obras principales de Rafael, porque sería una lástima omitir cualquiera de ellas en una visita a Roma. Es el pintor que, según se asegura, combina mejor la gracia de la forma con la sublimidad de la expresión. Esa, al menos, por lo que he podido colegir, es la opinión de los expertos.

Respuestas como aquella, dadas en un medido tono oficial, como de clérigo que lee de acuerdo con la rúbrica, no ayudaban a justificar las glorias de la Ciudad Eterna, ni hacían concebir en Dorothea la esperanza de que, si supiera más acerca de ellas, el mundo quedaría gozosamente iluminado en beneficio personal suyo. Difícilmente existe un contacto más deprimente para una joven criatura llena de ardor que el de una inteligencia en la que años de acumular conocimientos parecen haber producido una total ausencia de interés o de compasión.

Es cierto que en otros temas el señor Casaubon mostraba una perseverancia y un interés que suelen considerarse de manera habitual resultado del entusiasmo, y Dorothea deseaba con impaciencia seguir aquella espontánea dirección de los pensamientos de su marido, en lugar de que se le hiciera sentir que lo apartaba de ellos. Pero, poco a poco, iba perdiendo su antigua y encantadora confianza en llegar a divisar vastos horizontes hacia los que luego avanzaría siguiendo sus pasos. El pobre señor Casaubon se desorientaba entre armaritos y escaleras de caracol y no era sorprendente que ante una dificultad sobre los Cabiros[56], o al exponer los imprudentes paralelos de otros mitógrafos, perdiera de vista el propósito que le había empujado a realizar aquellos trabajos. Con su vela delante de los ojos se olvidaba de la ausencia de ventanas y, escribiendo amargos comentarios sobre las ideas de otros hombres acerca de las deidades solares, había llegado a ver con indiferencia la luz del sol.

Aquellas características, tan fijas e inmutables en el señor Casaubon como sus mismos huesos, podría haber seguido pasándolas por alto Dorothea si su marido la hubiera animado a expresar sus sentimientos de muchacha y de mujer, si le hubiera cogido las manos entre las suyas y escuchado con la alegría de la ternura y de la comprensión todas las pequeñas historias que componían su experiencia, entregándole a cambio el mismo tipo de intimidad, de manera que la vida anterior de cada uno pasara a formar parte del conocimiento y afecto mutuos; o si hubiera podido alimentar aquel afecto con las caricias infantiles a las que se siente inclinado el corazón de una mujer cariñosa, que ha empezado derramando besos sobre la dura cabeza de su muñeca calva, creando así, con la abundancia de su propio amor, un alma feliz en el interior de un trozo de madera. Tal era la inclinación de Dorothea. Además de su anhelo por conocer lo que estaba lejos de ella y de mostrarse bondadosa con todos, tenía también ardor suficiente para lo que estaba cerca, para besar la manga de la chaqueta del señor Casaubon, o acariciar el cordón de su zapato, si él hubiera hecho algún otro signo de aceptación además de declararla, con su indefectible corrección, poseedora de la naturaleza femenina más genuina y afectuosa, pero indicándole al mismo tiempo, al ofrecerle cortésmente una silla, que consideraba aquellas manifestaciones bastante vulgares y alarmantes. Una vez realizado su aseo clerical por las mañanas con el debido cuidado, el señor Casaubon se hallaba únicamente preparado para las cosas agradables de la vida que se amoldaban al tieso y bien ajustado corbatín de la época y a una inteligencia que soportaba el peso de abundante documentación inédita.

Y, por una triste contradicción, las ideas y los propósitos de Dorothea parecían hielo derretido que flotara y se fuese perdiendo dentro del cálido flujo del que no eran más que otra de sus formas posibles. Se sentía humillada al descubrirse víctima del sentimiento, como si fuera incapaz de conocer nada que no fuera por ese medio: toda su fuerza se dispersaba en ataques de agitación, de lucha consigo misma, de desaliento, y a continuación en visiones de una renuncia más completa, transformando en deber todos aquellos duros condicionamientos. ¡Pobre Dorothea! Resultaba sin duda molesta: sobre todo para sí misma; pero aquella mañana, por primera vez, también había resultado molesta para el señor Casaubon.

Todo empezó mientras tomaban café, con la decisión de Dorothea de desprenderse de lo que ella llamaba interiormente su egoísmo y que la llevó a volverse hacia su marido con el rostro lleno de alegría y de interés cuando él dijo:

—Mi querida Dorothea, debemos pensar en lo que aún queda por hacer, como paso preliminar para nuestra marcha. Me habría gustado volver a Inglaterra a tiempo para celebrar las Navidades en Lowick; pero mis indagaciones se han prolongado más allá del período previsto. Confío, sin embargo, en que el tiempo que hemos pasado aquí no te haya resultado desagradable. Entre los lugares de interés en Europa, Roma ha figurado siempre como uno de los más llamativos y en algunos aspectos edificante. Recuerdo muy bien que consideré mi primera visita a esta ciudad como un momento trascendental de mi vida; fue después de la caída de Napoleón, un suceso que abrió a los viajeros las puertas del Continente. Creo, efectivamente, que es una de las ciudades a las que se ha aplicado una hipérbole extremosa: «Ver Roma y luego morir»; pero en tu caso yo propondría una corrección y diría: ver Roma como novia y vivir después como esposa feliz.

El señor Casaubon pronunció este pequeño discurso con gran meticulosidad, guiñando un poco los ojos, balanceando la cabeza arriba y abajo y concluyendo con una sonrisa. El matrimonio no había resultado para él un estado exaltante, pero no albergaba la menor duda sobre su condición de marido irreprochable, capaz de hacer a una joven encantadora todo lo feliz que merecía ser.

—Espero que estés plenamente satisfecho con nuestra estancia… es decir, con los resultados que has conseguido hasta el momento con tus estudios —dijo Dorothea, tratando de que sus pensamientos no se apartaran de lo que más interesaba a su marido.

—Sí —respondió el señor Casaubon con esa peculiar entonación de la voz que convierte la palabra en una negativa a medias—. He tenido que llegar más lejos de lo que había previsto y se me han presentado

varios temas dignos de ser anotados y, aunque no tengo necesidad directa de ellos, no me ha sido posible pasarlos por alto. La tarea, a pesar de la asistencia de mi secretario, ha resultado hasta cierto punto laboriosa, pero tu compañía, afortunadamente, ha impedido que prolongara mis investigaciones más allá de las horas dedicadas al estudio, una tentación muy frecuente en mis años de vida solitaria.

—Me alegro mucho de que mi presencia haya supuesto un cambio para ti —dijo Dorothea, que conservaba un recuerdo muy nítido de veladas en las que llegó a suponer que el intelecto del señor Casaubon había profundizado demasiado durante el día para poder ascender de nuevo a la superficie. Mucho me temo que había una pizca de mal humor en su respuesta—. Espero que cuando volvamos a Lowick te llegue a ser de mayor utilidad y pueda ahondar un poco más en las cosas que te interesan.

—Sin duda, querida —dijo el señor Casaubon con una leve inclinación de cabeza—. Hará falta clasificar las notas que he tomado aquí y podrás, si así lo deseas, extractarlas bajo mi dirección.

—Y todas tus notas —dijo Dorothea, cuyo corazón ya se había consumido con fuego interior a propósito de la cuestión, y ahora no pudo evitar que le llegara hasta la lengua—. Todas esas hileras de volúmenes… ¿no harás ya lo que solías explicarme? ¿Decidir qué parte vas a utilizar y empezar a escribir el libro que hará útiles para el mundo tus vastos conocimientos? Escribiré lo que me dictes o copiaré y extractaré lo que me digas: no puedo serte de otra utilidad. —Dorothea, de manera inexplicable, misteriosamente femenina, terminó sus palabras con un leve sollozo y los ojos llenos de lágrimas.

Por sí sola, la excesiva emoción manifestada por su mujer habría sido muy perturbadora para el señor Casaubon, pero había además otras razones por las que aquellas frases se contaban entre las más hirientes y desagradables que Dorothea hubiese podido utilizar. Su ceguera ante las dificultades interiores de su marido era tan completa como la de él ante las suyas: no se había enterado aún de los ocultos conflictos del señor Casaubon que reclaman nuestra compasión. No había escuchado aún con paciencia los latidos del corazón de su marido, advirtiendo tan solo que el suyo latía con violencia. En los oídos del señor Casaubon la voz de Dorothea reiteró con sonora insistencia las sugerencias apenas audibles que le hacía su propia conciencia y que cabía explicar como simples fantasías, como ilusiones producidas por una exagerada sensibilidad; pero lo cierto es que, cuando esas críticas las repite alguien desde fuera con toda claridad, producen siempre una encarnizada resistencia porque se las considera crueles e injustas. Nos enoja incluso la plena aceptación de nuestras confesiones humillantes…: ¡cuánto más aún ha de molestarnos oír con palabras claras y distintas, de labios de un observador cercano, esos murmullos confusos que tratamos de llamar morbosos y contra los que luchamos como si fueran el principio de la desintegración! Y aquel cruel acusador exterior aparecía allí en forma de esposa, más aún, de recién casada que, en lugar de observar las muchas líneas escritas y la abundancia de papel con el incondicional asombro de un hermoso canario, parecía presentarse como una espía que lo observaba todo con una maligna capacidad de análisis. En esta particular dirección de la brújula, el señor Casaubon poseía una sensibilidad comparable a la de Dorothea y la misma rapidez para imaginar más de lo que existía. Anteriormente había observado, aprobándola, la capacidad de su joven esposa para interesarse por lo más adecuado; pero ahora previó con repentino horror que aquella capacidad podía ser reemplazada por el atrevimiento, y el interés quedar sustituido por la más exasperante de todas las críticas: la que distingue vagamente la posibilidad de muchas conclusiones brillantes sin tener la más mínima noción de lo que cuesta alcanzarlas.

Por primera vez desde que Dorothea lo conocía, apareció en el rostro del señor Casaubon un brusco gesto de cólera.

—Amor mío —dijo, con irritación controlada por el decoro—, puedes confiar en mí para reconocer las épocas y las estaciones, adaptadas a las diferentes fases de una obra que no debe medirse por las superficiales conjeturas de espectadores ignorantes. Me habría sido fácil conseguir un efecto momentáneo mediante el espejismo de unas opiniones sin fundamento; pero una de las tribulaciones sempiternas del investigador escrupuloso es verse entorpecido por el impaciente desdén de los parlanchines que solo buscan logros insignificantes, incapaces como son de alcanzar nada mejor. Y sería conveniente que tales personas aprendieran a diferenciar los problemas cuya verdadera entidad queda por completo fuera de su alcance de aquellos otros cuyos datos pueden abarcarse mediante un breve y superficial examen.

El señor Casaubon pronunció aquel parlamento con una energía y celeridad muy poco frecuentes en él. No se trataba, efectivamente, de una completa improvisación, sino de algo que había ido tomando forma mediante un coloquio interior y que brotó con la fuerza de los redondos granos de un fruto cuando un calor repentino lo hace estallar. Dorothea no era solo su esposa: era la personificación de ese mundo superficial que rodea al autor injustamente tratado o presa del desánimo.

Dorothea, por su parte, también se indignó. ¿No había reprimido todo lo que había en su interior, excepto el deseo de compartir de alguna forma los principales intereses de su marido?

—Mi opinión era muy superficial… acorde, sin duda, con mi capacidad de raciocinio —respondió, con espontáneo resentimiento que no necesitó de ensayos previos—. Tú me enseñaste las hileras de cuadernos… Has hablado de ellos con frecuencia… Has dicho muchas veces que hace falta digerirlos. Pero nunca te he oído hablar de la obra que habrá de publicarse. Se trata de hechos muy sencillos y mis conclusiones no han ido más allá. Solo te he suplicado que me permitieras serte de alguna utilidad.

Dorothea se levantó para abandonar la mesa y el señor Casaubon guardó silencio, tomando una carta que tenía al lado, como para examinarla de nuevo. Ambos se sentían sorprendidos y alarmados por haber dejado traslucir su irritación. Si hubiesen estado en su propia casa, instalados en su vida ordinaria de Lowick, entre sus vecinos, la confrontación habría sido menos embarazosa; pero en un viaje de bodas, cuyo objeto específico es aislar a dos personas con la justificación de que son el mundo entero el uno para el otro, la conciencia del desacuerdo resulta, por no decir otra cosa, en extremo perturbadora y frustrante. Trasladarse muy lejos y situarse en condiciones de soledad moral para encontrarse después con pequeñas explosiones de mal humor, para descubrir que la conversación se hace difícil y para tener que entregar un vaso de agua sin mirar a quien lo recibe, difícilmente puede considerarse un buen resultado incluso desde el punto de vista de los caracteres más enteros. Para la inexperta sensibilidad de Dorothea, aquello parecía una catástrofe que modificaba todas las perspectivas; y para el señor Casaubon era un nuevo sufrimiento, ya que nunca había hecho antes un viaje de bodas, ni se había visto forzado a aceptar una unión íntima que tenía mucho más de sujeción de lo que él había sido capaz de imaginar, ya que aquella novia joven y encantadora no solo le obligaba a tener con ella muchos miramientos (cosa que el señor Casaubon había llevado a cabo con gran diligencia), sino que había resultado capaz de causarle una cruel agitación precisamente allí donde más necesitado estaba de sosiego. En lugar de conseguir una suave defensa contra el público frío, espectral y poco demostrativo de su vida de erudito, ¿no había logrado en cambio hacerle sentir con mayor claridad su presencia?

Ninguno de los dos consideró posible volver a hablar de inmediato. Pero modificar un acuerdo previo y renunciar a salir habría constituido una manifestación de perseverancia en el enfado que la conciencia de Dorothea juzgó censurable, teniendo en cuenta sobre todo que ya empezaba a sentirse culpable de lo ocurrido. Por muy justa que pudiera ser su indignación, su ideal no era reclamar justicia, sino manifestar ternura. De manera que cuando el coche llegó ante la puerta, Dorothea fue con el señor Casaubon al Vaticano, recorrió con él la Galería Lapidaria y, al separarse a la entrada de la biblioteca, fue a visitar el museo sin otra razón que la simple indiferencia ante todo lo que la rodeaba. Le faltó el ánimo para volver sobre sus pasos y decir que deseaba ir a otro sitio. Naumann la vio por primera vez cuando el señor Casaubon se separaba de ella, y el pintor entró en la larga galería de esculturas al mismo tiempo; pero Naumann tenía que esperar a Ladislaw para resolver la apuesta de una botella de champán sobre una enigmática figura de aspecto medieval que se encontraba allí mismo. Después de examinar la figura y de seguir paseando hasta dar por zanjada la discusión, se habían separado, y Ladislaw se había rezagado mientras Naumann penetraba en la Galería de las Estatuas donde vio de nuevo a Dorothea, con aquel gesto meditabundo y ausente que hacía llamativa su postura. En realidad, la señora Casaubon no veía ni el rayo de sol en el suelo ni las estatuas: veía en su interior la luz de los años futuros en su propio hogar, la luz que iluminaría también los campos de Inglaterra y los olmos y los caminos bordeados de setos; y sentía que la senda para llenar aquellos años de gozosa dedicación no estaba ya tan clara como antes. Pero en el espíritu de Dorothea existía una corriente a la que toda idea y sentimiento acababa antes o después por incorporarse: el esfuerzo de todo su ser consciente por alcanzar la verdad más plena, el bien menos parcial. No había duda de que existía algo mejor que la cólera y el desánimo.

Capítulo XXI

> También su elocuencia era femenina y sencilla,
> sin usar palabras rebuscadas
> para parecer sabia.
>
> CHAUCER

Tal fue el motivo de que Dorothea empezara a sollozar tan pronto como se encontró a solas en sitio seguro. Pero en seguida vinieron a sobresaltarla unos golpes a la puerta que la obligaron a secarse precipitadamente las lágrimas antes de contestar: «¡Adelante!». Tantripp le presentó una tarjeta y dijo que había un caballero esperando en el vestíbulo. El guía le había dicho que solo estaba en casa la señora Casaubon, pero él había respondido que era pariente del señor Casaubon; ¿querría recibirlo la señora?

—Sí —dijo Dorothea inmediatamente—; hágale pasar al salón.

Lo más importante que recordaba sobre el joven Ladislaw era que al verle en Lowick se había percatado de la generosidad de su marido con él y también de que las vacilaciones de Will en cuanto a la elección de carrera habían despertado su simpatía. Dorothea siempre se animaba ante cualquier oportunidad de manifestar un interés activo, y en aquel momento tuvo la impresión de que la visita tenía por objeto sacarla de su ensimismado descontento, recordarle la bondad de su marido y hacerle sentir que también ella tenía ahora derecho a colaborar en todas sus buenas obras. Esperó un minuto o dos, pero cuando entró en la habitación vecina aún quedaban suficientes restos de lágrimas en su rostro para darle una apariencia más juvenil y atrayente que de costumbre. Dorothea obsequió a Ladislaw con una exquisita sonrisa de buena voluntad totalmente desprovista de presunción y le tendió la mano. Will era varios años mayor, pero en aquel momento parecía mucho más joven, porque su tez muy blanca se coloreó de repente y habló con una timidez muy distinta del espontáneo aplomo de sus modales con Naumann, mientras que el deseo de tranquilizar a su interlocutor hizo que Dorothea se sintiera más segura de sí misma.

—No sabía que usted y el señor Casaubon estuvieran en Roma hasta esta mañana, cuando la he visto en el Museo Vaticano —dijo él—. La reconocí inmediatamente… pero… en fin, supuse que encontraría la dirección del señor Casaubon en la lista de correos, y estaba deseoso de presentarles mis respetos a usted y a él lo antes posible.

—Siéntese, por favor. Mi marido no está ahora aquí, pero le alegrará saber de usted, estoy segura —dijo Dorothea acomodándose de manera instintiva entre la chimenea y la luz de la ventana más alta y señalando una silla que tenía enfrente, con el sosiego de una bondadosa matrona, por lo que los signos de dolor juvenil que persistían en su rostro resultaban aún más llamativos—. El señor Casaubon está muy ocupado; pero dejará usted su dirección, ¿no es cierto?, y él le escribirá.

—Es usted muy amable —dijo Ladislaw, empezando a perder su apocamiento por el interés con que observaba las huellas de lágrimas que alteraban el rostro de Dorothea—. La dirección está en mi tarjeta. Pero, si usted me lo permite, volveré mañana a una hora en que sea probable que el señor Casaubon se halle en casa.

—Va todos los días a investigar a la biblioteca del Vaticano y es muy difícil verlo como no sea mediante cita. Especialmente ahora. Vamos a marcharnos dentro de poco, y mi marido está muy ocupado. Normalmente pasa fuera casi todo el tiempo, desde la hora del desayuno hasta la cena. Pero estoy segura de que querrá que cene usted con nosotros.

Will Ladislaw perdió el habla por unos momentos. Nunca había sentido afecto por el señor Casaubon y,

de no haber sido porque se sabía en deuda con él, lo habría tomado a broma sin escrúpulos. Pero la idea de que aquel pedante acartonado, aquel fabricante de pequeñas explicaciones, tan importantes, poco más o menos, como el remanente de falsas antigüedades acumulado en la trastienda de un buhonero, después de lograr que criatura tan adorable se casara con él, pasase lejos de ella la luna de miel, buscando a tientas sus mohosas futilidades (Will tenía tendencia a las hipérboles)… fue una imagen repentina que despertó en él una especie de cómica repugnancia: se sintió dividido entre el impulso de reír a carcajadas y el deseo igualmente intempestivo de estallar en desdeñosas invectivas. Por un instante notó que aquel forcejeo causaba una extraña contorsión en sus expresivos rasgos, pero con un esfuerzo considerable logró convertirlo en algo tan poco ofensivo como una sonrisa alegre.

Dorothea se sorprendió; pero la sonrisa era irresistible y se sintió inmediatamente contagiada. La sonrisa de Will Ladislaw era muy agradable a menos que uno ya estuviera enfadado con él: era un borbotón de luz interior que iluminaba su tez blanca además de los ojos, y que jugaba con cada curva y cada línea como si algún Ariel las estuviera dotando de un nuevo atractivo, alejando para siempre cualquier resto de melancolía. Dorothea, al devolverle la sonrisa, no pudo por menos de incluir en ella también un poco de buen humor, incluso bajo unas pestañas oscuras todavía húmedas por las lágrimas, al tiempo que preguntaba inquisitivamente:

—¿Hay algo que le parece divertido?

—Sí —dijo Will, que tenía buena capacidad de improvisación—. Pensaba en la impresión que debí causarle la primera vez que nos vimos, cuando aniquiló usted mi pobre boceto con su crítica.

—¿Mi crítica? —dijo Dorothea, aún más sorprendida—. No puede ser. Siempre me he creído muy ignorante en cuestiones de pintura.

—Yo sospeché que sabía usted tanto que estaba en condiciones de hacer precisamente el comentario más hiriente. Dijo (estoy seguro de que no lo recuerda tan bien como yo) que no conseguía ver la relación entre mi apunte y la naturaleza. Al menos fue eso lo que dio a entender. —Ahora Will pudo ya reír abiertamente.

—Tuvo que ser mi ignorancia —dijo Dorothea, admirando el buen humor de Will—. Debí decirlo porque nunca me parecen bellos los cuadros que, según mi tío, todos los críticos consideraban de gran calidad. Y he visitado Roma sin haber superado aún esa ignorancia. Son pocos los cuadros con los que disfruto de verdad. Al principio, cuando entro en una sala con las paredes cubiertas de frescos o de cuadros extraordinarios, siento una especie de temor reverente… como un niño que presencia una gran ceremonia con suntuosas vestiduras y procesiones; me veo ante una vida más elevada que la mía. Pero cuando empiezo a examinar los cuadros uno a uno, la vida se escapa de ellos o se transforma en algo que me resulta violento y extraño. Debe de ser mi torpeza. Veo demasiadas cosas al mismo tiempo y no entiendo ni la mitad. Eso siempre hace que uno se sienta estúpido. Es doloroso oír decir que algo es muy hermoso y no ser capaz de apreciarlo… como la ceguera cuando otras personas hablan del color del cielo.

—Hay muchas cosas en la apreciación del arte que dependen de gustos adquiridos —dijo Will. Aquella vez era imposible poner en duda la sinceridad de la confesión de Dorothea—. El arte es un lenguaje muy antiguo con muchos estilos artificiosos y a veces el principal placer que se obtiene surge del hecho mismo de reconocerlos. Yo disfruto aquí inmensamente con todas las variedades del arte, pero supongo que si pudiera desmenuzar ese placer descubriría que está compuesto de muchos hilos diferentes. Está ligado en parte al hecho de dedicarse uno mismo a pintarrajear algunas cosas y a tener por ello cierta idea del proceso utilizado.

—¿Acaso ha decidido ser pintor? —dijo Dorothea, descubriendo una nueva dirección para su interés—. ¿Se propone hacer de la pintura su profesión? Al señor Casaubon le gustará saber que ha escogido usted un camino.

—No, no —dijo Will, con cierta frialdad—. Estoy totalmente en contra de eso. Es una vida demasiado volcada en una sola dirección. He tratado mucho a los artistas alemanes de aquí: vine desde Frankfurt con uno. Algunos son excelentes personas, incluso gente brillante… pero no me gustaría acabar como ellos, contemplando el mundo únicamente desde el punto de vista de su estudio de pintor.

—Eso soy capaz de entenderlo —dijo Dorothea cordialmente—. Y en Roma parece como si hubiera muchísimas cosas en el mundo que son más necesarias que los cuadros. Pero si usted tiene talento para la pintura, ¿no sería lógico aceptar eso como una orientación? Quizá pueda hacer cosas mejores… o diferentes por lo menos, de manera que no haya tantos cuadros casi iguales en el mismo sitio.

No era posible engañarse sobre la sinceridad de aquellas palabras y Will se sintió inclinado a la franqueza.

—Un artista ha de tener un talento muy singular para acometer cambios así. Temo que el mío no me serviría siquiera para hacer bien lo que ya se ha hecho, al menos no lo bastante bien para que mereciese la

pena. Y nunca lograré triunfar en nada a fuerza de trabajo monótono. Si las cosas no me resultan fáciles no las termino.

—He oído lamentarse al señor Casaubon de su escasa paciencia —dijo Dorothea amablemente. Le escandalizaba bastante aquella manera de tomarse la vida como unas vacaciones.

—Sí; conozco la opinión del señor Casaubon. En eso no estamos de acuerdo.

Los leves indicios de desdén en aquella precipitada respuesta ofendieron a Dorothea. Las dificultades de la mañana la hacían aún más susceptible.

—Es cierto que hay diferencias entre ustedes —dijo, con bastante altivez—. No era mi intención establecer comparaciones: la perseverancia con que el señor Casaubon se consagra a su trabajo no tiene nada de común.

Will advirtió que su interlocutora se había ofendido, pero aquello solo contribuyó a reavivar el latente desagrado que le producía el señor Casaubon. Era intolerable que Dorothea reverenciara a su marido: semejante debilidad en una mujer solo es agradable para el marido de la interesada. Los seres humanos caen fácilmente en la tentación de echar por tierra la irritante gloria de su vecino y no se les ocurre que tal ejecución sea un asesinato.

—No, desde luego —respondió Will con prontitud—. Y, por consiguiente, es una lástima que se desperdicie, como sucede con gran parte de la erudición inglesa, por ignorancia de lo que se está haciendo en el resto del mundo. Si el señor Casaubon leyera alemán se ahorraría muchas dificultades.

—No le entiendo —dijo Dorothea, asustada y ansiosa.

—Me refiero tan solo —dijo Will como quitándole importancia— a que los alemanes han tomado la delantera en la investigación histórica y se ríen de los resultados obtenidos buscando a tientas en un bosque con una brújula de bolsillo, mientras ellos han construido ya buenas carreteras. Cuando estaba con el señor Casaubon me di cuenta de que no quería saber nada de ese asunto; leyó casi a la fuerza un tratado en latín escrito por un alemán. Lo sentí mucho.

Will solo había pensado en asestar un golpe eficaz que echara por tierra aquella laboriosidad tan celebrada, y era incapaz de imaginar la magnitud de la herida. El joven Ladislaw no estaba muy al tanto de los escritores alemanes; pero no es necesario haber trabajado en demasía para advertir los puntos flacos de otras personas.

La pobre Dorothea sintió un dolor tan intenso al imaginar que la tarea a la que su marido había consagrado toda la vida pudiera carecer de valor que no le quedaron energías para preguntarse si aquel joven pariente, tan en deuda con el señor Casaubon, no debería haberse callado semejante comentario. No llegó siquiera a hablar: no hizo más que contemplarse las manos, desolada ante aquella idea.

Will, sin embargo, después de asestar el golpe mortal, se sintió más bien avergonzado, imaginando, por el silencio de Dorothea, que la había ofendido aún más; y comprendiendo, igualmente, que había privado a su benefactor de su mayor motivo de orgullo.

—Lo lamenté de manera especial —continuó, pasando, como es costumbre, de la crítica al elogio insincero— debido a la gratitud y al respeto que siento por mi primo. No tendría tanta importancia si se tratara de un hombre de talento y personalidad menos notables.

Dorothea alzó los ojos, más brillantes que de costumbre por la emoción que la dominaba, y dijo con infinita tristeza:

—¡Cómo me gustaría haber aprendido alemán cuando estuve en Lausana! Había muchos profesores alemanes. Pero ahora ya no puedo serle de utilidad.

Will encontró una nueva luz, aunque siguiera siendo una luz misteriosa, en las últimas palabras de Dorothea. El problema de cómo había llegado a casarse con Casaubon —resuelto la primera vez con la explicación de que debía de ser una mujer desagradable a pesar de las apariencias— no podía solucionarse ya por aquel método tan sencillo y tan fácil. Dorothea podía ser cualquier cosa, pero no tenía nada de desagradable. No era fríamente inteligente ni retorcidamente satírica, sino que rebosaba sentimiento y adorable simplicidad. Era un ángel engañado. Tenía que ser un placer singular detenerse a escuchar las melodiosas armonías con que su corazón y su alma se expresaban de forma tan directa y tan ingenua. De nuevo acudió al pensamiento de Will la imagen del arpa eolia.

Una muchacha así tenía que haber convertido el matrimonio en original aventura romántica. Y, si el señor Casaubon fuese un dragón que se la hubiera llevado a su guarida utilizando simplemente la fuerza de sus garras, prescindiendo de formalidades legales, habría sido una gesta heroica y necesaria liberarla y caer rendido a sus pies. Pero su primo resultaba mucho menos manejable que un dragón: era un benefactor respaldado por la sociedad y estaba entrando en la habitación en aquel momento con toda la impecable corrección de sus modales, mientras Dorothea reflejaba vivamente en su expresión la alarma y el pesar

recién despertados por las palabras de Ladislaw, y este, por su parte, dejaba traslucir la animación suscitada por sus admirativas consideraciones sobre los sentimientos de su interlocutora.

El señor Casaubon sintió sorpresa sin mezcla alguna de placer, pero no se desvió en absoluto de su habitual tono cortés cuando Will se puso en pie y explicó su presencia. El señor Casaubon estaba menos satisfecho de lo normal y quizá eso daba a su aspecto un aire más mortecino y desdibujado; también es posible que produjera ese efecto el contraste con la juventud de su primo. La primera impresión al ver a Will era de un soleado resplandor, que se añadía a la incertidumbre provocada por sus expresiones cambiantes. Con toda seguridad, sus rasgos mismos cambiaban de forma; la mandíbula parecía unas veces grande y otras pequeña; y la leve ondulación de la nariz era una preparación para sucesivas metamorfosis. Cuando giraba deprisa la cabeza, su cabello parecía desprender luz, y algunas personas estaban convencidas de reconocer en aquellos chispazos una clara señal de genio. El señor Casaubon, por el contrario, no dejaba escapar el menor rayo de luz.

Dorothea, al volver ansiosamente los ojos hacia su marido, quizá no fue insensible a este contraste que, en todo caso, solo contribuyó, en unión con otras causas, a despertar en ella una nueva preocupación por el señor Casaubon, primer síntoma de una ternura compasiva alimentada por la situación real de su marido y no por sus propios sueños. Y, sin embargo, que Will estuviera presente era una fuente de mayor libertad para ella; la semejanza de los dos en edad era grata, y quizá también su disposición a dejarse convencer. Dorothea sentía una inmensa necesidad de tener a alguien con quien hablar y nunca había conocido a nadie que pareciera tan despierto y tan flexible, tan capaz de entenderlo todo.

El señor Casaubon manifestó con sesuda entonación su esperanza de que la estancia de Will en Roma le fuese provechosa al mismo tiempo que agradable —había creído que su intención era quedarse en el sur de Alemania— y le rogó que cenara con ellos al día siguiente, para poder hablar con más sosiego; en aquel momento se encontraba un tanto cansado. Ladislaw se hizo cargo, y después de aceptar la invitación abandonó la casa.

Los ojos de Dorothea siguieron con inquietud a su marido mientras el señor Casaubon se desplomaba en el extremo de un sofá, donde, apoyando el codo, se sujetó la cabeza con la mano y fijó la mirada en el suelo. Un poquito sonrojada y con los ojos brillantes, Dorothea se sentó a su lado y dijo:

—Perdóname por haberte hablado tan a la ligera esta mañana. No tenía razón. Tengo miedo de haberte herido y de haberte hecho más difícil el día.

—Me alegro de que lo veas así, querida —dijo el señor Casaubon. Hablaba tranquilamente e inclinando un poco la cabeza, pero al mirarla aún había desasosiego en sus ojos.

—Pero ¿me perdonas? —dijo Dorothea con un breve sollozo. La necesidad de manifestar de alguna forma la intensidad de sus sentimientos hacía que estuviese dispuesta a exagerar su propia falta. El Amor ¿no vería venir desde lejos a la Penitencia y se echaría sobre su cuello para besarla?

—Mi querida Dorothea: «Quien no se satisface con el arrepentimiento no es ni del cielo ni de la tierra»[57]; no creo que me consideres merecedor de ser proscrito con tan severa sentencia —dijo el señor Casaubon, esforzándose por poner convicción en sus palabras y también por sonreír débilmente.

Dorothea guardó silencio, pero una lágrima que había aparecido junto con el sollozo insistía en caer.

—Estás emocionada, querida. Y yo también siento las desagradables consecuencias de un excesivo desorden mental —dijo el señor Casaubon.

De hecho, tenía intención de decirle a su mujer que no debiera haber recibido al joven Ladislaw en su ausencia; pero se abstuvo, en parte por la sensación de que sería descortés sacar a colación una nueva queja en el momento mismo de su arrepentida confesión, en parte para evitarse la nueva agitación que pudiera producirle hacer otra vez uso de la palabra, y en parte porque era demasiado orgulloso para poner de manifiesto una tendencia a los celos que no agotaba con sus eruditos colegas hasta el punto de no poder desplegarlos también en otras direcciones. Existe cierta clase de celos que necesita muy poco fuego: difícilmente puede calificárselos de pasión; es más bien una especie de moho que se cría en la espesa y húmeda melancolía del egoísmo desasosegado.

—Creo que es hora de vestirnos —añadió él, mirando el reloj.

Ambos se pusieron en pie y nunca más volvió a aludirse entre ellos a lo que había pasado aquel día.

Pero Dorothea lo recordó siempre con la nitidez con que todos recordamos los momentos de nuestra vida en que muere alguna ilusión largamente acariciada o nace una nueva esperanza. Aquel día la señora Casaubon empezó a comprender que era un espejismo esperar de su marido una respuesta a sus sentimientos y advirtió también el nacimiento de una premonición: en la vida de su marido quizá existiera una tristeza que le llevaba a estar tan necesitado de consuelo como ella.

Todos nacemos en un estado de insensibilidad moral, en el que consideramos el mundo como una ubre

con que alimentar nuestro yo; Dorothea había empezado muy pronto a superar esa insensibilidad, pero le había resultado más fácil imaginar cómo se consagraría al señor Casaubon y se haría prudente y fuerte con su prudencia y su fortaleza, que concebir, con esa claridad que ya no es reflexión sino sentimiento —una idea engarzada de nuevo con la inmediatez de los sentidos y que es semejante a la solidez de los objetos—, que el yo de su marido tenía un centro equivalente, donde las luces y las sombras siempre se proyectaban de manera algo distinta.

Capítulo XXII

Nous causâmes longtemps; elle était simple et bonne.
Ne sachant pas le mal, elle faisait le bien;
Des richesses du coeur elle me fit l'aumône,
Et tout en écoutant comme le coeur se donne,
Sans oser y penser, je lui donnai le mien;
Elle emporta ma vie, et n'en sut jamais rien.[58]

ALFRED DE MUSSET

Will Ladislaw estuvo muy cordial durante la cena del día siguiente y no dio ocasión a que el señor Casaubon se sintiera incómodo. A Dorothea le pareció, más bien, que Will tenía una manera de hacer que su marido participara en la conversación y de escucharle con deferencia más eficaz que la de ninguna de las personas que había conocido hasta entonces. ¡También era cierto que los oyentes de Tipton Grange no poseían talentos fuera de lo común! Will hablaba mucho, pero decía las cosas con tal rapidez y con tal aire de que sus palabras carecían de importancia que daba la impresión de ser un alegre y pequeño carillón después de la gran campana. Aunque no fuese siempre perfecto, aquel era sin duda uno de sus días buenos. Describió pequeños incidentes entre las pobres gentes de Roma que solo podía haber presenciado alguien que se moviera con gran libertad; descubrió que estaba de acuerdo con el señor Casaubon sobre lo erróneo de las opiniones de Middleton[59] acerca de las relaciones entre judaísmo y catolicismo; y pasó sin dificultad a una descripción mitad entusiástica y mitad humorística del placer que hallaba en el mismo carácter heterogéneo de Roma, que volvía flexible el pensamiento obligándolo a constantes comparaciones e impedía ver las edades del mundo como una colección de compartimientos estancos sin conexión vital. Los estudios del señor Casaubon, hizo notar Will, siempre habían sido demasiado amplios para que les sucediera eso, pero él tenía que confesar que Roma le había proporcionado un sentido completamente nuevo de la historia como totalidad: los fragmentos estimulaban su imaginación y hacían de él un constructor. Luego, de vez en cuando, pero no con demasiada frecuencia, se dirigía a Dorothea y analizaba lo que ella decía, como si hubiera que tener en cuenta sus opiniones incluso antes de emitir un juicio definitivo sobre la *Madona di Foligno* o sobre el *Laoconte*. La sensación de estar contribuyendo a dar forma a la opinión del mundo hace la conversación particularmente alegre; y ni siquiera el señor Casaubon dejó de sentir orgullo por su joven esposa, que hablaba mejor que la mayoría de las mujeres, como de hecho él ya había advertido al elegirla.

Puesto que todo marchaba tan agradablemente, cuando el señor Casaubon explicó que su tarea en la biblioteca quedaría suspendida por un par de días y que después de una breve prórroga no tendrían ya razón alguna para continuar en Roma, Will se atrevió a sugerir que la señora Casaubon no debiera marcharse sin ver un estudio o dos. ¿No estaría su marido dispuesto a acompañarla? Sería una lástima perdérselos; se trataba de algo muy especial; era una forma de vida que crecía como un tipo de vegetación de pequeñas dimensiones, con su población de insectos, sobre fósiles de gran tamaño. A Will le agradaría mucho servirles de guía… sin llegar a cansarlos; tan solo unos cuantos ejemplos.

El señor Casaubon, al advertir la mirada anhelante que le dirigía Dorothea, no pudo por menos de preguntarle si estaría interesada en tales visitas: ahora él se hallaba a su disposición durante todo el día; y quedaron de acuerdo en que Will fuera a buscarlos a la mañana siguiente y les sirviera de guía.

Will no pudo omitir a Thorwaldsen[60], una celebridad viviente por quien incluso el mismo señor Casaubon se interesó, pero, antes de que el día estuviera muy avanzado, los condujo al estudio de su amigo Adolf Naumann, al que describió como uno de los más importantes renovadores del arte cristiano, uno de

los que no solo habían revitalizado, sino también ampliado, la gran idea de considerar los acontecimientos supremos como misterios de los que eran espectadores las épocas sucesivas, con lo que las grandes almas de todos los períodos se convertían, por así decirlo, en contemporáneas de estos misterios. Will añadió que había sido alumno de Naumann durante una temporada.

—He estado haciendo algunos apuntes al óleo bajo su dirección —dijo Will—. No me gusta copiar. Tengo que poner algo de mí mismo en todo lo que hago. Naumann ha estado pintando a los santos tirando del carro de la Iglesia y yo he hecho un apunte del *Tamerlán* de Marlowe llevando a los reyes vencidos en su carroza. No soy tan dado a lo eclesiástico como Naumann y a veces me burlo de él por el exceso de significado de sus cuadros. Pero esta vez quiero sobrepasarle en la amplitud del propósito. Concibo a Tamerlán en su carroza como personificación de la tremenda carrera de la historia natural del mundo espoleando a las dinastías enjaezadas. Mi parecer es que se trata de una buena interpretación mítica. —Will miró en aquel momento al señor Casaubon, que recibió tan desenfadada manera de tratar el simbolismo con gran desasosiego e inclinó la cabeza con aire neutral.

—El apunte debe de ser muy grande, si es capaz de transmitir todo eso —dijo Dorothea—. Creo que yo necesitaría algunas explicaciones incluso acerca del significado que usted le da. ¿Quiere que Tamerlán represente a terremotos y volcanes?

—Sí, sí —dijo Will riendo—, y migraciones de razas y talas de bosques… y América y la máquina de vapor. ¡Todo lo que pueda usted imaginar!

—¡Qué difícil me parece una taquigrafía así! —dijo Dorothea, sonriendo a su marido—. Se necesitarían todos tus conocimientos para lograr leerla.

El señor Casaubon parpadeó furtivamente mirando a Will. Tenía la sospecha de ser objeto de una burla. Pero no era posible incluir a Dorothea en aquella sospecha.

Encontraron a Naumann pintando con gran aplicación, aunque sin ningún modelo presente; sus cuadros se hallaban ventajosamente colocados y su figura misma, sencilla y llena de vitalidad, destacaba gracias a una blusa de color blanco y una gorra marrón de terciopelo, de manera que todo estaba tan bien dispuesto como si esperase recibir precisamente en aquel momento la visita de la hermosa joven inglesa.

El pintor, con su buen dominio del inglés, explicó con brevedad los cuadros terminados y también los inconclusos, y daba la impresión de observar al señor Casaubon tanto como a Dorothea. Will intervenía de vez en cuando con fogosas palabras de elogio, resaltando los particulares méritos de la obra de su amigo; y Dorothea tuvo la impresión de que estaba adquiriendo ideas completamente nuevas sobre el significado de *madonnas* sentadas bajo inexplicables tronos con dosel y una perspectiva campestre como único fondo, y de santos con modelos arquitectónicos en las manos, o con cuchillos accidentalmente hundidos en el cráneo. Algunas cosas que le habían parecido monstruosas empezaron a resultarle inteligibles e incluso a tener una explicación lógica; pero todo aquello formaba parte, al parecer, de una rama del conocimiento por la que el señor Casaubon no sentía personalmente ningún interés.

—Creo que prefiero captar la belleza de la pintura a tener que considerarla como un enigma; pero aprendería a entender estos cuadros antes que los suyos, con un simbolismo tan amplio —dijo Dorothea, hablando con Will.

—No hable de mí como pintor delante de Naumann —dijo Will—. Le dirá que todo lo que yo hago es *pfuscherei*[61], ¡que es la palabra más ignominiosa que conoce!

—¿Es eso cierto? —dijo Dorothea, volviendo sus sinceros ojos hacia Naumann, que hizo una mueca apenas perceptible y dijo:

—Nunca se dedicará seriamente a la pintura. Lo suyo deben de ser las *belles-lettres*, algo mucho más amplio.

La pronunciación que Naumann daba a la primera vocal parecía estirar la palabra satíricamente. A Will no le gustó demasiado, pero consiguió echarse a reír; y el señor Casaubon, aunque le molestaba un tanto el acento alemán del artista, empezó a sentir cierto respeto por su juiciosa severidad.

Este respeto no disminuyó cuando Naumann, después de un breve aparte con Will y de mirar primero un lienzo de grandes proporciones y después al señor Casaubon, se acercó de nuevo y dijo:

—Mi amigo Ladislaw cree que me perdonará usted, señor, si le digo que un apunte de su cabeza tendría un valor inestimable para el santo Tomás de Aquino que ha de figurar en ese cuadro. Es pedir demasiado, lo comprendo; pero son muy pocas las veces en que encuentro exactamente lo que quiero: lo ideal en lo real.

—Me deja usted atónito —dijo el señor Casaubon, cuyo aspecto mejoró de inmediato con el brillo de la satisfacción—; pero si mi pobre fisonomía, que estoy acostumbrado a considerar de la especie más corriente, puede serle de algún uso, proporcionándole rasgos para un retrato del Doctor Angélico, me sentiré muy honrado. Es decir, si la operación no se prolonga demasiado; y si la señora Casaubon no pone

objeciones a ese retraso.

Por lo que se refiere a Dorothea, nada habría podido complacerla más, excepto que una voz sobrenatural reconociera al señor Casaubon como el mejor y el más sabio entre los hijos de los hombres. En ese caso su fe tambaleante hubiera vuelto a afirmarse.

El caballete de Naumann estaba a mano y en perfecto orden, de manera que la realización del apunte comenzó al instante mientras la conversación seguía fluyendo. Dorothea tomó asiento y se quedó callada, sintiéndose más feliz que en las últimas semanas. Todas las personas que la rodeaban le parecían buenas, y se dijo a sí misma que Roma, si ella hubiera sido un poco menos ignorante, le habría parecido repleta de belleza: su tristeza habría encontrado las alas de la esperanza. No sería posible hallar un temperamento menos suspicaz que el suyo: de niña creía en la gratitud de las avispas y en la delicadeza de los gorriones, y se indignó en consonancia cuando tuvo ocasión de comprobar su ruindad.

El hábil artista estaba haciendo al señor Casaubon preguntas sobre política inglesa, que daban pie a largas respuestas, y Will, mientras tanto, se había situado en unos escalones al fondo, desde donde se dominaba todo el estudio.

En seguida Naumann dijo:

—Ahora, si pudiera dejar esto durante media hora y seguir después… Ven a verlo, Ladislaw… Creo que hasta aquí es perfecto.

Will dejó escapar esas sentidas exclamaciones en las que la admiración va más allá de la sintaxis; y Naumann añadió con tono de honda pesadumbre:

—Si hubiera dispuesto de más tiempo… pero ustedes tienen otros compromisos… No estaría bien pedirlo… ni siquiera que volvieran mañana.

—¡Quedémonos! —dijo Dorothea—. No tenemos nada que hacer excepto pasear, ¿no es cierto? —añadió mirando con expresión suplicante al señor Casaubon—. Sería una pena que el retrato no quedara bien terminado.

—Estoy a su servicio en este asunto —dijo el señor Casaubon con amable deferencia—. Después de haber entregado el interior de mi cabeza a la ociosidad, parece oportuno que por lo menos su exterior trabaje de esta manera.

—¡Cuánta bondad la suya!… ¡Hace que me sienta feliz! —dijo Naumann, y a continuación siguió hablando en alemán con Will, señalando distintos fragmentos del apunte, como considerando lo que quedaba por hacer. Luego, apartándolo un momento, miró alrededor con aire indeciso, como buscando alguna ocupación para sus visitantes; finalmente se volvió hacia el señor Casaubon y dijo:

—Quizá la hermosa novia, la encantadora dama, no tenga inconveniente en permitir que ocupe el tiempo sobrante tratando de hacer un rápido apunte suyo… No, por supuesto, como puede usted ver, para el cuadro… tan solo como un estudio aislado.

El señor Casaubon, con una inclinación de cabeza, se mostró convencido de que la señora Casaubon no pondría ninguna objeción, y Dorothea dijo de inmediato:

—¿Dónde debo colocarme?

Naumann se deshizo en excusas por pedirle que siguiera de pie, permitiendo que le corrigiera la postura, cosa que ella aceptó, sin recurrir tampoco a ninguna de esas risas y actitudes afectadas que con frecuencia se consideran necesarias en tales ocasiones.

—Quiero que pose usted como santa Clara… —le dijo el pintor—, inclinada así, con la mejilla apoyada en la mano… Así… mirando a ese taburete, por favor, ¡así!

Will se encontró dividido entre el deseo de caer a los pies de la santa y besar su túnica, y la tentación de derribar a Naumann de un puñetazo mientras cambiaba de posición un brazo de Dorothea. Todo aquello era desvergüenza y profanación, y se arrepintió de haber llevado allí a la mujer de su primo.

El artista empezó a trabajar con diligencia, y Will, reponiéndose, se acercó al señor Casaubon y procuró distraerlo lo mejor que supo; pero no logró evitar que finalmente el tiempo se le hiciera largo, como quedó claro cuando manifestó el temor de que su esposa estuviera cansada. Naumann recogió la insinuación y dijo:

—Ahora, señor, si no tiene usted inconveniente, dejaré en libertad a la señora.

Así la paciencia de Casaubon resistió algo más, y cuando, a la larga, se comprobó que la cabeza de santo Tomás de Aquino quedaría perfecta en otra sesión, el modelo no tuvo inconveniente en comprometerse a volver el día siguiente, y en el curso de aquella segunda sesión también santa Clara fue objeto de más de un retoque. El señor Casaubon encontró tan de su agrado el resultado de todo ello que hizo las disposiciones necesarias para adquirir el cuadro en el que santo Tomás de Aquino se sentaba entre los doctores de la Iglesia tomando parte en un debate demasiado abstracto para ser representado, pero que era escuchado con

más o menos atención por un público situado en la parte superior del lienzo. En cuanto a santa Clara, de la que se habló en segundo lugar, Naumann se declaró insatisfecho: no podía, en conciencia, comprometerse a pintar un cuadro que mereciera la pena; de manera que acerca de santa Clara el acuerdo solo fue condicional.

No me extenderé sobre los chistes de Naumann a expensas del señor Casaubon aquella noche, ni sobre sus entusiastas alabanzas al atractivo de Dorothea, tarea en la que Will colaboró, pero con una diferencia. Tan pronto como Naumann mencionaba cualquier detalle de la belleza de Dorothea, Ladislaw se irritaba, considerándolo un atrevimiento: había vulgaridad en su elección de las palabras más corrientes y ¿qué derecho tenía a hablar de sus labios? No era una criatura de la que se pudiera hablar como de otras mujeres. Will no podía decir con exactitud lo que pensaba, pero estaba irritado. Y, sin embargo, cuando después de alguna resistencia consintió en llevar a los Casaubon al estudio de su amigo, le atrajo la satisfacción que suponía para su orgullo ser la persona que proporcionara a Naumann la oportunidad de estudiar la belleza de Dorothea… o más bien su divinidad, porque las frases corrientes que pudieran aplicarse a la mera hermosura corporal no servían en su caso. (Sin duda todo Tipton y sus alrededores, así como la misma Dorothea, se hubieran sorprendido ante aquellos elogios a su belleza. En aquella parte del mundo la señorita Brooke no pasaba de ser una «excelente joven»).

—Hazme el favor de dejar ese tema, Naumann. No se debe hablar de la señora Casaubon como si fuera una modelo —dijo Will.

El pintor se quedó mirándolo.

—*Schön!* Hablaré de mi Tomás de Aquino. La cabeza no está mal, después de todo. Juraría que al filósofo mismo le hubiese halagado posar para un retrato. ¡En cuestiones de vanidad no hay nadie que supere a esos doctores tan estirados! Resultó como yo pensaba: su retrato le interesaba mucho más que el de su mujer.

—Es un pedante sin sangre en las venas —dijo Will, con ímpetu mal reprimido. Su interlocutor no estaba al corriente de sus obligaciones con el señor Casaubon, pero él sí pensaba en ellas, con el deseo de que fuera posible liquidarlas mediante un cheque.

Naumann se encogió de hombros y dijo:

—Me alegro de que se vayan pronto, amigo mío. Están echando a perder tu buen humor.

Todas las esperanzas de Will se concentraron en hallar algún medio para ver a Dorothea cuando estuviera a solas. Quería únicamente que se fijara un poco más en él; solo deseaba que su recuerdo adquiriese un poco más de importancia de la que, con toda probabilidad, tenía hasta el momento. Le impresionaba mucho aquella buena voluntad cálida y sincera que, según había descubierto, era su estado de ánimo habitual. La adoración a distancia de una mujer inalcanzable, colocada sobre un pedestal, desempeña un papel muy importante en la vida de los hombres, pero en la mayoría de los casos el adorador anhela algún gesto regio de agradecimiento, algún signo de aprobación con el que la soberana de su alma pueda darle una alegría sin descender por ello de su elevado pedestal. Eso era precisamente lo que Will quería. Pero había muchas contradicciones en las demandas de su imaginación. Era hermoso ver cómo los ojos de Dorothea se volvían con suplicante ansiedad de esposa hacia el señor Casaubon: habrían perdido algo de su halo si les hubiera faltado esa actitud sumisa; y, sin embargo, un momento después, la aburrida aceptación de semejante néctar por parte del marido le resultaba igualmente intolerable; y aunque tuviera muy claras las razones para dominarse, no por ello le atormentaba menos el deseo de decir cosas ofensivas sobre el señor Casaubon.

Will no había sido invitado a cenar al día siguiente. De aquí que se convenciera a sí mismo de que estaba obligado a hacer una visita, y de que el único momento posible tenía que ser el mediodía, cuando el señor Casaubon no estuviera en casa.

Dorothea, ignorante de que su marido se hubiese disgustado con ella por recibir a Will, no albergó la menor duda, en especial porque quizá se tratase de una visita de adiós. Cuando Ladislaw entró, estaba mirando algunos camafeos que había comprado para Celia. Saludó a Will como si su visita fuese una cosa completamente natural.

—Me alegro de que haya venido —dijo al instante, señalando el brazalete que tenía en la mano—. Quizá sea usted un experto en camafeos y pueda decirme si estos son realmente buenos. Quería contar con usted para escogerlos, pero el señor Casaubon pensó que no había tiempo. Mañana termina su trabajo y nos marchamos dentro de tres días. Me preocupan los camafeos. Por favor, siéntese y mírelos.

—No soy particularmente experto, pero no hay mucha posibilidad de error con esos pequeños fragmentos homéricos: son exquisitos. Y el color es excelente: le sentarán muy bien.

—Son para mi hermana, que tiene una tez muy distinta de la mía. Me vio usted con ella en Lowick: es

rubia y muy bonita… a mí al menos me lo parece. Nunca hemos pasado tanto tiempo separadas. Celia es un encanto y siempre se porta bien. Antes de salir de viaje me enteré de que quería que le comprara algunos camafeos y sentiría mucho que no fuesen buenos… dentro de lo que cabe. —Dorothea añadió una sonrisa a aquellas últimas palabras.

—Me parece que no le interesan demasiado los camafeos —dijo Will, sentándose a cierta distancia y observándola mientras cerraba el estuche.

—Francamente, no; no creo que tengan mucha importancia en la vida —dijo Dorothea.

—Me temo que es usted una herética en cuestiones de arte. ¿Cómo es eso? La habría imaginado con una gran receptividad para lo bello en todas sus manifestaciones.

—Imagino que soy torpe para muchas cosas —dijo Dorothea con sencillez—. Me gustaría hacer la hermosa vida… la vida de todo el mundo. Y por eso todo este inmenso dispendio de arte, que parece de algún modo quedar fuera de la vida y no mejorarla en absoluto, me apena. La conciencia de que la mayoría de la gente no disfruta con ello echa a perder el placer que yo pudiera sentir.

—Yo llamo a eso el fanatismo de la compasión —dijo Will impetuosamente—. Podría usted decir lo mismo del paisaje, de la poesía, de todos los refinamientos. Si lo llevara hasta sus últimas consecuencias tendría que sufrir por su propia bondad, y volverse malvada para no tener ventajas sobre otros. La mejor forma de la piedad es disfrutar… cuanto se puede. Entonces estará usted haciendo lo mejor para lograr que la tierra siga siendo un planeta agradable. Y el placer se difunde. No es posible cuidar del mundo en su totalidad, pero eso es lo que sucede cuando alguien disfruta… en arte o en cualquier otra cosa. ¿Quiere usted convertir a toda la juventud del mundo en un coro trágico que gime y moraliza sobre el dolor? Sospecho que tiene usted una fe equivocada en las virtudes del sufrimiento, y quiere convertir su vida en un martirio. —Will había ido más lejos de lo que pretendía, y se detuvo.

Pero los pensamientos de Dorothea no habían tomado la misma dirección que los suyos, y le contestó sin especial emoción:

—Se equivoca usted conmigo. No soy una criatura triste y melancólica. Nunca soy desgraciada durante mucho tiempo. Me enfado y me porto mal… no como Celia: tengo grandes estallidos y luego, de nuevo, todo me parece inmejorable. No puedo por menos de creer en cosas maravillosas de una manera un tanto irracional. Estaría muy dispuesta a disfrutar con el arte de Roma, pero hay muchas cosas cuya razón no conozco… muchas cosas que me parecen una consagración de la fealdad y no de la belleza. La pintura y la escultura quizá sean estupendas, pero el sentimiento es con frecuencia rastrero y brutal, y a veces incluso ridículo. En ocasiones veo algo que inmediatamente me parece noble… algo que puedo comparar con los montes Albanos o con la puesta de sol desde el Pincio; pero eso hace aún más lastimoso que haya tan pocas cosas de primera calidad en un conjunto de obras trabajadas con tanto esfuerzo.

—Es cierto que siempre hay muchas cosas de poca calidad: las obras extraordinarias necesitan de ese suelo abonado para crecer.

—Ya veo —dijo Dorothea, llevando aquella idea al flujo central de sus preocupaciones— que resulta muy difícil hacer algo valioso. Se me ha ocurrido con frecuencia desde que llegué a Roma que, en su mayoría, nuestras vidas resultarían, si pudiéramos colgarlas de la pared, más feas y chapuceras que los cuadros.

Dorothea abrió la boca de nuevo como si fuese a decir algo más, pero cambió de idea y guardó silencio.

—Es usted demasiado joven… Es un anacronismo que tenga esas ideas —dijo Will con energía, con un rápido movimiento de cabeza habitual en él—. Habla como si no hubiera conocido la juventud. Es monstruoso… como si hubiera tenido una visión de los infiernos en la infancia, como el muchacho[62] de la leyenda. Se ha criado usted con algunas de esas horribles ideas que, como minotauros[63], eligen a las mujeres más dulces para devorarlas. Y ahora irá usted a encerrarse a esa prisión de piedra en Lowick: será como enterrarse viva. ¡Me enfurece pensar en ello! Preferiría no haberla visto nunca a tener que imaginármela con semejantes perspectivas.

Will temió haber ido una vez más demasiado lejos; pero el significado que atribuimos a las palabras depende de nuestros sentimientos, y su tono de malhumorado pesar contenía tanta amabilidad para Dorothea, cuyo corazón siempre había despedido calor sin recibir a cambio mucho de quienes la rodeaban, que la señora Casaubon experimentó un nuevo sentimiento de gratitud y contestó con una dulce sonrisa:

—Le agradezco mucho que se preocupe por mí. Pero es que a usted no le gusta Lowick: ha puesto el corazón en otra clase de vida. Para mí Lowick es el hogar que he escogido.

Esta última frase fue pronunciada con una entonación casi solemne, y Will no supo qué decir, ya que no le hubiese servido de nada besarle los zapatos y decirle que estaba dispuesto a morir por ella; era evidente que Dorothea no necesitaba nada parecido; así que se quedaron los dos callados unos instantes, hasta que

ella se decidió a decir lo que había estado pensando con anterioridad.

—Quería preguntarle de nuevo sobre algo que dijo usted el otro día. Quizá fuera en buena parte su manera de decirlo: ya he notado que pone usted mucha fuerza en sus afirmaciones; yo misma exagero a menudo cuando hablo con precipitación.

—¿Qué fue lo que dije? —preguntó Will, observando que Dorothea hablaba con una timidez nueva en ella—. Tengo una lengua hiperbólica: va prendiéndose fuego mientras se mueve. Estoy seguro de que tendré que retractarme.

—Me refiero a lo que dijo sobre la necesidad de saber alemán… para el tema que el señor Casaubon investiga. He estado pensando en ello; y me parece que, dados sus conocimientos, el señor Casaubon debe de tener a su disposición los mismos materiales que los estudiosos alemanes… ¿no es cierto? —La timidez de Dorothea se debía a la conciencia un tanto confusa de que se encontraba en la extraña posición de consultar a una tercera persona la validez de los conocimientos del señor Casaubon.

—No se trata exactamente de los mismos materiales —dijo Will, pensando que sabría mostrarse debidamente reservado—. Dese cuenta de que su marido no es un orientalista. En ese campo solo afirma tener conocimientos de segunda mano.

—Pero hay libros muy valiosos sobre antigüedades que fueron escritos hace mucho tiempo por eruditos que no sabían nada acerca de estas cosas modernas; y todavía se siguen usando. ¿Por qué no tendría que ser valioso el del señor Casaubon, igual que los otros? —dijo Dorothea, poniendo cada vez mayor energía en su objeción. Sentía la necesidad de repetir en voz alta el razonamiento que había desarrollado antes mentalmente.

—Eso depende de la línea de estudio que se haya emprendido —dijo Will, pasando también a utilizar un tono de réplica—. El tema que el señor Casaubon ha elegido es tan cambiante como la química: nuevos descubrimientos crean constantemente nuevos puntos de vista. ¿Quién quiere un sistema basado en los cuatro elementos o un libro donde se refute a Paracelso? ¿No ve usted que no sirve de nada irse arrastrando a cierta distancia tras hombres del siglo pasado (hombres como Bryant)[64] y corregir sus errores? ¿Ni tampoco vivir en un cuarto trastero y reparar teorías con las patas rotas acerca de Kus y Misraím[65]?

—¿Cómo puede usted hablar con tanta ligereza? —dijo Dorothea, lanzándole una mirada entre el pesar y la indignación—. Si fuera como usted dice, ¿podría haber algo más triste que haber hecho en vano tanto trabajo entusiasta? Me asombra que no manifieste usted mayor pesar si cree realmente que un hombre de tan gran bondad, inteligencia y sabiduría como el señor Casaubon puede fracasar en lo que ha sido su principal tarea durante los mejores años de su vida. —Empezaba a escandalizarse por haber llegado hasta aquel punto en sus suposiciones, y sentía indignación contra Will por haberla conducido hasta allí.

—Usted me ha preguntado sobre hechos, no sobre sentimientos —dijo Will—. Pero si quiere usted castigarme por los hechos, lo acepto. No estoy en situación de expresar mis sentimientos por el señor Casaubon: se trataría en el mejor de los casos del panegírico de un pariente que depende de él.

—Discúlpeme, por favor —dijo Dorothea, ruborizándose muy deprisa—. Me doy cuenta, como usted dice, de que la culpa es mía por haber planteado el tema. Soy yo quien está totalmente equivocada. El fracaso después de una larga perseverancia tiene mucha más grandeza que no haber realizado nunca un esfuerzo lo bastante intenso para que luego quepa hablar de fracaso.

—Estoy completamente de acuerdo con usted —dijo Will, decidido a dar un nuevo giro a la conversación—; hasta el punto de que he resuelto no correr ese riesgo: deseo exponerme al fracaso. Quizá la generosidad del señor Casaubon ya ha sido peligrosa para mí, y estoy decidido a renunciar a la libertad que me ha dado. Quiero volver muy pronto a Inglaterra y trabajar por mi cuenta, depender únicamente de mí mismo.

—Eso está muy bien… Respeto ese sentimiento —dijo Dorothea, con renovada amabilidad—. Pero estoy segura de que en este asunto el señor Casaubon siempre ha pensado en su felicidad con exclusión de cualquier otro motivo.

«Tiene la suficiente obstinación y orgullo para utilizarlos en lugar del amor, ahora que ya se ha casado con él», se dijo Will. Luego exclamó en voz alta, poniéndose en pie:

—No volveré a verla.

—Quédese hasta que llegue el señor Casaubon —replicó Dorothea con toda sinceridad—. Estoy muy contenta de que nos hayamos encontrado en Roma. Quería conocerle.

—Y yo he conseguido enfadarla —dijo Will—. He hecho que piense usted mal de mí.

—¡Oh, no! Mi hermana me dice que siempre me enfado con las personas que no dicen exactamente lo que yo quiero. Pero no creo que llegue al extremo de pensar mal de ellos. Al final casi siempre acabo por pensar mal de mí misma, por ser tan impaciente.

—De todas formas no le gusto; me he convertido en una idea desagradable para usted.

—En absoluto —dijo Dorothea, con la más sincera amabilidad—. Me inspira usted una gran simpatía.

Will no se tranquilizó por completo, pensando que quizá hubiese logrado hacerse más importante desatando en ella una reacción de desagrado. No dijo nada y su rostro adquirió una expresión de desánimo, casi de malhumor.

—Y estoy muy interesada en ver lo que hace usted —continuó Dorothea alegremente—. Creo de todo corazón que existen diferencias naturales entre las vocaciones. Si no fuera por esa fe, supongo que sería una persona de horizontes muy estrechos… Hay muchísimas cosas, además de la pintura, en las que mi ignorancia es completa. Difícilmente daría usted crédito a lo poco que he asimilado en el campo de la música y de la literatura, temas que usted conoce tan bien. Me pregunto cómo se definirá su vocación: ¿se convertirá usted en poeta?

—Eso depende. Ser poeta es tener un alma tan rápida en el discernimiento que no se escape el menor matiz cualitativo, y tan veloz en el sentir que el discernimiento sea una mano que, con diversidad delicadamente ordenada, toque las cuerdas de la emoción… un alma en la que el conocimiento se transforme instantáneamente en sentimiento, y el sentimiento vuelva atrás de inmediato como un nuevo órgano de conocimiento. Es posible que esa capacidad solo se posea de manera intermitente.

—Pero se olvida usted de los poemas —dijo Dorothea—. Creo que son necesarios para completar al poeta. Entiendo lo que quiere usted decir con lo del conocimiento que se transforma en sentimiento, porque eso es exactamente lo que yo experimento. Pero estoy segura de que nunca podría escribir un poema.

—Usted es un poema… y esa ha de ser la mejor parte de un poeta, lo que constituye la conciencia del poeta en sus mejores momentos —dijo Will, poniendo de manifiesto la originalidad que todos compartimos con la mañana y la primavera y otros interminables procesos de renovación.

—Me alegra mucho oírlo —dijo Dorothea, riendo al hablar e imprimiendo a sus palabras una modulación como de pájaro, al tiempo que miraba a Will con traviesa gratitud en los ojos—. ¡Qué cosas tan amables me dice usted!

—Me gustaría poder hacer algo que fuese lo que usted llama amable… Me gustaría poder prestarle algún servicio, por insignificante que fuera. Temo que no se me presente nunca la oportunidad. —Will hablaba con fervor.

—¡Claro que sí! —dijo Dorothea cordialmente—. Esa oportunidad llegará; y yo me acordaré de sus buenos deseos. Estaba completamente convencida de que llegaríamos a ser amigos la primera vez que lo vi… por su parentesco con el señor Casaubon. —Había cierto brillo líquido en sus ojos, y Will advirtió que también los suyos estaban húmedos, obedeciendo a una ley de la naturaleza.

La alusión al señor Casaubon podría haberlo echado todo a perder si en aquel momento hubiese habido algo capaz de estropear el poder subyugador, la dignidad generosa de su noble y confiada inexperiencia.

—E incluso ahora hay una cosa que puede usted hacer por mí —dijo Dorothea, levantándose y caminando un poco, movida por el impulso de una preocupación recurrente—. Prométame que no volverá a hablar nunca con nadie de ese tema (me refiero a los escritos del señor Casaubon)… como lo ha hecho antes, quiero decir. He sido yo quien le ha empujado a ello. He tenido yo la culpa. Pero prométamelo.

Había vuelto sobre sus pasos para detenerse frente a Will, mirándolo gravemente.

—Claro que sí, se lo prometo —dijo Will, enrojeciendo, sin embargo.

Si no volvía a decir nunca una palabra hiriente sobre el señor Casaubon y renunciaba a su ayuda, sería sin duda permisible odiarlo mucho más. El poeta debe saber cómo odiar, dice Goethe; y Will, al menos, ya estaba en posesión de aquel talento. Dijo que tenía que irse sin esperar al señor Casaubon, y que acudiría a despedirse de él en el último momento. Dorothea le dio la mano, e intercambiaron un simple «adiós».

Pero al salir por la *porte cochère*, Ladislaw se encontró con el señor Casaubon, y este caballero, después de desearle éxito en sus futuras actividades, renunció cortésmente al placer de otra visita de despedida al día siguiente, ya que la jornada estaría más que ocupada con los preparativos de la marcha.

—Tengo algo que decirte sobre nuestro primo, el señor Ladislaw, que creo mejorará tu opinión acerca de él —dijo Dorothea en el transcurso de la velada. Ya había dicho, nada más aparecer su marido, que Will acababa de marcharse y que había prometido volver. El señor Casaubon mencionó su encuentro, y añadió que se habían despedido definitivamente, según creía. Estas últimas palabras las pronunció con el tono y la expresión que utilizamos para dar a entender que determinado asunto, privado o público, no nos interesa lo suficiente para desear que se hagan nuevos comentarios. Dorothea, por consiguiente, prefirió esperar.

—¿De qué se trata, amor mío? —preguntó el señor Casaubon (siempre utilizaba «amor mío» cuando sus modales eran especialmente ceremoniosos).

—Ha decidido abandonar sus vagabundeos, y renuncia también a depender de tu generosidad. Quiere

volver muy pronto a Inglaterra y abrirse camino por su propio esfuerzo. He creído que te parecería una buena señal —dijo Dorothea, mirando suplicante el rostro indiferente de su marido.

—¿Ha hablado en concreto de la ocupación a que piensa consagrarse?

—No. Pero dijo que se daba cuenta del peligro que encerraba para él tu generosidad. Te escribirá, por supuesto. ¿No mejora tu opinión sobre el señor Ladislaw al saber de su resolución?

—Esperaré a que me informe sobre ese asunto —respondió el señor Casaubon.

—Le dije que estaba segura de que tu mayor preocupación al ayudarle era su propia felicidad. Recuerdo tus bondadosas palabras al hablar de él cuando lo vi por primera vez en Lowick —dijo Dorothea, poniendo una mano sobre la de su marido.

—Tenía una obligación con él —dijo el señor Casaubon, colocando su otra mano sobre la de Dorothea en aceptación consciente de la caricia, pero acompañando el gesto con una mirada incapaz de ocultar su desasosiego—. Ese joven, lo confieso, no es por lo demás un objeto de interés para mí, y no es preciso, en mi opinión, que nos ocupemos de sus actividades futuras, sobre las que no podemos influir más allá de los límites que ya he indicado suficientemente.

Dorothea no volvió a hablar de Will.

Libro tercero

En espera de la muerte

Capítulo XXIII

¡Los caballos del Sol! —dijo—.
Y un auriga de primera clase, ¡Apolo!
Sean quienes fueren, lucharé con toda mi alma,
y su derrota será sonada.

Fred Vincy, como hemos visto, daba vueltas a una deuda en la imaginación, y aunque peso tan incorpóreo no podía deprimir a aquel joven caballero durante muchas horas seguidas, existían circunstancias relacionadas con esta deuda que hacían su recuerdo particularmente importuno. El acreedor era el señor Bambridge, un tratante de caballos de la zona, cuya compañía buscaban con afán los jóvenes aficionados a la buena vida. Durante las vacaciones Fred había participado en más diversiones de las que le permitía el dinero en efectivo con que contaba, y el señor Bambridge no solo aceptó su crédito a la hora de alquilar monturas y de responder por el gasto imprevisto de un excelente caballo de caza echado a perder, sino que también le había adelantado una pequeña cantidad con que hacer frente a algunas pérdidas en el billar. El total de la deuda era de ciento sesenta libras. A Bambridge no le preocupaba su dinero, convencido de que el joven Vincy tenía personas que lo respaldaban, pero pidió algún comprobante, y Fred le hizo primero un recibo con su firma. Tres meses más tarde renovó este documento con la firma de Caleb Garth. En ambas ocasiones Fred confiaba en poder pagar la deuda, ya que tenía a su disposición las amplias reservas de su optimismo. Sería absurdo pedirle que su confianza estuviera basada en realidades objetivas, ya que, como todos sabemos, una confianza como esa está hecha de una sustancia menos basta y material: es una reconfortante disposición por la que llegamos a esperar que la sabiduría de la Providencia o la estupidez de nuestros amigos, los misterios de la suerte o el misterio aún mayor de nuestro gran valor personal en el conjunto del universo, producirán agradables consecuencias, de acuerdo con nuestro buen gusto en el vestir y nuestra preferencia por artículos de primera calidad. Fred estaba seguro de que recibiría un regalo de su tío, de que la suerte le sonreiría, de que por medio de un «cambalache» metamorfosearía gradualmente un caballo de cuarenta libras en otro por el que pudieran darle cien en cualquier momento… porque el «discernimiento» equivale siempre a una cantidad no especificada de dinero contante y sonante. Y en cualquier caso, aun suponiendo unos resultados negativos que tan solo una desconfianza morbosa podría imaginar, a Fred le quedaba siempre (en aquel momento) el recurso último al bolsillo de su padre, de manera que sus depósitos de esperanza contaban además con ese maravilloso suplemento. Sobre la capacidad del bolsillo de su padre, Fred tenía unas ideas sumamente vagas, pero ¿no es el comercio una cosa muy elástica? Y ¿no es cierto que el déficit de un año se puede subsanar con los excedentes de otro? Los Vincy vivían en el desahogo y en la abundancia, sin las ostentaciones de la riqueza recién adquirida, pero de acuerdo con las costumbres y tradiciones de la familia, y de este modo los hijos más pequeños no tenían ningún criterio de economía y los mayores conservaban en parte la idea infantil de que su padre, si lo consideraba oportuno, podía pagarles cualquier cosa. El mismo señor Vincy tenía costumbres caras para Middlemarch: gastaba dinero en las carreras de caballos, en tener abastecida su bodega y en las cenas que daba, mientras que la señora de la casa disfrutaba de esas cuentas abiertas con los proveedores que producen la tranquilizadora sensación de que uno puede conseguir todo lo que quiere sin que surja en ningún momento el problema de cómo pagarlo. Pero Fred sabía que martirizar a los hijos quejándose de lo mucho que gastan forma parte de la manera de ser de los padres; siempre se desataba una pequeña tormenta acerca de su prodigalidad cuando se veía obligado a revelar la existencia de una deuda, y a Fred

no le gustaba el mal tiempo de puertas adentro. Tenía un sentimiento filial demasiado arraigado para faltarle al respeto a su padre, y soportaba los truenos con la seguridad de que iban a durar poco pero, al mismo tiempo, era desagradable ver llorar a su madre y tener que adoptar un aire melancólico en lugar de estar alegre; porque Fred era una persona con tan buen humor que cuando lo regañaban su tristeza tenía como motivo básico la necesidad de guardar las apariencias. Sin duda alguna lo más fácil era renovar el pagaré con la firma de un amigo. ¿Por qué no? Con tan amplias garantías de optimismo a su disposición no existían motivos para que Fred no aumentara sin límite alguno las obligaciones de otras personas, si se exceptúa el hecho de que los hombres cuyo apellido bastaba para cubrir cualquier riesgo eran de ordinario pesimistas, poco dispuestos a creer que el orden universal de las cosas tuviera necesariamente que sonreír a un joven caballero de muy buenas prendas.

Cuando hemos de pedir un favor, revisamos la lista de nuestros amigos, hacemos justicia a sus mejores cualidades, olvidamos sus pequeñas ofensas y tratamos de llegar a la conclusión de que todos y cada uno de ellos estarán deseosos de complacernos, ya que nuestro deseo de que se nos complazca es tan comunicable como otros entusiasmos. Sin embargo, siempre hay unos cuantos que se desechan hasta que los demás se hayan negado, por considerarlos solo moderadamente deseosos de complacernos; y sucedió que Fred acabó tachando a todos sus amigos menos uno, basándose en que recurrir a ellos sería desagradable; con lo que daba por sentado implícitamente que él al menos (fueran las que fuesen las conclusiones que se sacaran sobre la humanidad en general) tenía derecho a evitar cualquier situación desagradable. Que él llegara alguna vez a verse en alguna decididamente desagradable —tener que utilizar pantalones que hubiesen encogido al lavarlos, comer cordero frío, ir andando a cualquier sitio por falta de caballo, o «tener que bajar la cabeza» de cualquier manera— era un absurdo imposible de reconciliar con las favorables intuiciones depositadas en él por la naturaleza. Y Fred daba un respingo ante la idea de que alguien lo mirase de arriba abajo por estar necesitado de dinero para saldar pequeñas deudas. Fue así como acabó eligiendo al mejor de sus amigos; a Caleb Garth, en otras palabras.

Los Garth querían a Fred tanto como Fred los quería a ellos; porque, cuando Rosamond y él eran niños y los Garth se hallaban en mejor situación económica, el remoto parentesco entre las dos familias a través de los matrimonios del señor Featherstone (primero con la hermana del señor Garth y después con la de la señora Vincy) había desembocado en un trato que tuvo por protagonistas más a los hijos que a los padres: los niños bebían té en las mismas tazas de juguete y pasaban juntos todo el día. Mary era traviesa y decidida, y a los seis años Fred la consideraba la chica más encantadora del mundo y la convirtió en su esposa con una anilla de latón que había cortado de un paraguas. A través de todas las etapas de su educación el joven Vincy conservó su afecto por los Garth y la costumbre de considerar su casa como un segundo hogar, aunque el trato entre ellos y los mayores de su familia hubiera cesado mucho tiempo antes. Incluso cuando Caleb Garth era un hombre próspero, los Vincy lo trataban a él, y también a su mujer, de manera condescendiente, porque en Middlemarch se hacían escrupulosas distinciones de rango; y aunque los antiguos fabricantes tampoco podían ya emparentarse, como les sucedía a los duques, únicamente con sus iguales, tenían conciencia de una inherente superioridad social que se definía en la práctica con gran meticulosidad, aunque fuera muy difícil darle expresión teórica. Posteriormente el señor Garth había fracasado en el negocio de la construcción, tarea que por desgracia había añadido a sus otras ocupaciones de agrimensor, tasador y agente, continuando ese negocio durante algún tiempo enteramente en beneficio de sus representados, y viviendo luego en gran estrechez, esforzándose al máximo para poder pagar, a pesar de todo, veinte chelines por cada libra. Esto último ya lo había logrado, y para todos aquellos que no lo consideraban un mal precedente, sus honrosos esfuerzos le habían granjeado la estima debida; pero en ninguna parte del mundo basta con la estima para recibir visitas elegantes, si por otra parte faltan los muebles adecuados y un servicio completo de vajilla. La señora Vincy nunca se había sentido a gusto con la señora Garth, y frecuentemente hablaba de ella como de una mujer que había tenido que trabajar para ganarse el pan, refiriéndose a su condición de maestra antes de casarse; por lo que la familiaridad con Lindley Murray[66] y con las *Cuestiones* de Mangnall venía a ser algo así como el dominio de un mercero sobre las diferentes marcas de percal, o el conocimiento que posee un guía turístico de los países extranjeros; ninguna mujer con una posición desahogada tenía necesidad de cosas así. Y desde que Mary llevaba la casa del señor Featherstone, los reparos que la señora Vincy ponía a los Garth se habían convertido en algo más positivo, ante la alarmante posibilidad de que Fred se prometiese con aquella chica insignificante, cuyos padres «vivían tan modestamente». Fred, consciente de ello, nunca hablaba en casa de sus visitas a la señora Garth, que se habían hecho más frecuentes en los últimos tiempos, ya que el ardor creciente de su afecto por Mary lo inclinaba aún más hacia los suyos.

El señor Garth tenía un pequeño despacho en la ciudad, y a él acudió Fred con su petición. Obtuvo lo

que deseaba sin mucha dificultad, porque una dosis considerable de experiencias penosas no había logrado que Caleb Garth se volviera cauteloso en sus propios asuntos ni que dudara de sus hermanos los hombres si no habían demostrado ser indignos de su confianza; y él tenía a Fred en gran aprecio, estaba «seguro de que el chico acabaría siendo un hombre de bien —un muchacho sincero y afectuoso, con muy buen fondo—, y de que se podía confiar en él para cualquier cosa». Tales eran las razones psicológicas de Caleb, una de esas raras personas que son estrictas con ellas mismas e indulgentes con los demás. Los errores de sus vecinos le daban cierta vergüenza, y nunca hablaba de ellos de buena gana; de aquí que fuera difícil apartar su pensamiento del mejor método para endurecer la madera y de otros ingeniosos recursos, para dedicarse a prever tales errores. Si tenía que censurar a alguien, necesitaba, antes de empezar, cambiar de sitio todos los papeles a su alcance, o trazar diferentes diagramas con su bastón, o hacer cálculos con el cambio que llevaba en el bolsillo; y prefería hacer el trabajo de otros antes que criticar sus actividades. Mucho me temo que era incapaz de imponer a nadie una estricta disciplina.

Cuando Fred expuso las circunstancias de su deuda, su deseo de hacerle frente sin molestar a su padre, y su convicción de que el dinero aparecería antes de que alguien sufriera el menor inconveniente, Caleb se subió los lentes, escuchó, miró a su preferido a los ojos y le creyó, sin distinguir la confianza en el futuro de la veracidad sobre el pasado; pero le pareció que era el momento oportuno para una amistosa insinuación sobre su comportamiento, y para hacer una seria advertencia a Fred antes de firmar el pagaré. De manera que tomó el papel, se bajó los lentes, comprobó el espacio de que disponía, buscó la pluma, la examinó, la mojó en el tintero, volvió a examinarla, luego apartó un poco el papel, se alzó de nuevo los lentes, bajó aún más el ángulo externo de sus tupidas cejas, gesto que daba a sus facciones una peculiar mansedumbre (perdónense estos detalles por una vez: el lector habría llegado a apreciarlos si hubiese conocido a Caleb Garth) y dijo con tono sosegado:

—Fue una desgracia que el caballo se rompiera las patas, ¿no es cierto? Y luego esos trueques no dan resultado cuando tienes que vértelas con profesionales. Espero que otra vez seas más prudente, muchacho.

Con lo que Caleb volvió a colocarse los lentes y procedió a estampar su firma con el cuidado que siempre ponía para realizar aquel acto; porque todo lo que formaba parte de sus tareas profesionales lo hacía bien. Contempló las letras grandes y bien proporcionadas y la rúbrica final con la cabeza algo inclinada hacia un lado durante un momento, luego alargó el pagaré a Fred, se despidió de él y volvió inmediatamente a sumergirse en el plano de las nuevas dependencias agrícolas de sir James Chettam.

Ya fuera porque su interés en aquel trabajo expulsara el incidente de la firma de su memoria o por alguna otra razón que Caleb tenía más presente, lo cierto es que la señora Garth permaneció ignorante del asunto.

Desde entonces se había producido en el horizonte de Fred un cambio que modificó su percepción de las distancias, con lo que el regalo en metálico de su tío Featherstone tuvo importancia suficiente para lograr que un color le viniera y otro se le fuera, primero al hacerse unas ilusiones demasiado concretas y después en razón del posterior desengaño. Su fracaso en los exámenes había hecho más imperdonable aún para su padre la acumulación de deudas universitarias, y la tormenta familiar alcanzó proporciones hasta entonces desconocidas. El señor Vincy juró que, si tenía que volver a enfrentarse con algo parecido, Fred saldría de su casa para ganarse la vida como mejor pudiera; y desde entonces no había recobrado aún por completo el tono bien humorado con que solía hablar a su hijo, el cual logró además enfurecerlo de manera especial cuando anunció que no quería ser ministro del Señor y que, más bien, preferiría «no seguir con aquello». Fred no ignoraba que se le habría tratado aún con mayor severidad si tanto su familia como él no creyeran ya en secreto que había de ser el heredero del señor Featherstone, considerando que lo orgulloso que el viejo caballero estaba de él, y el afecto que le manifestaba, eran los mejores sustitutos de una conducta más ejemplar; de la misma manera que cuando un joven aristócrata roba unas joyas llamamos a su acto cleptomanía, lo comentamos con una sonrisa filosófica y nunca se nos ocurre enviarlo a un correccional como si se tratara de un chico harapiento que ha robado unos nabos. De hecho, las esperanzas ligadas a su tío Featherstone determinaban el punto de vista con que la mayoría de la gente miraba a Fred Vincy en Middlemarch; y a él mismo le proporcionaban una perspectiva aérea de tremenda altura. Pero el regalo de billetes de banco, una vez realizado, era mensurable, y al compararlo con el importe de la deuda, ponía de manifiesto un déficit que habría de ser cubierto o bien gracias al discernimiento de Fred o bien mediante la colaboración de la suerte de alguna otra forma. Porque el pequeño episodio de maledicencia que le había obligado a solicitar la ayuda de su padre para conseguir el certificado de Bulstrode era una razón más para no pedir al señor Vincy el dinero con que pagar la verdadera deuda. Fred era lo bastante perspicaz para prever que la indignación difuminaría las distinciones y que su aseveración de no haber aceptado un préstamo dando como garantía el testamento de su tío parecería falsa. Había contado a su padre un molesto

problema, guardando silencio acerca del otro: en tales casos la revelación completa siempre da impresión de duplicidad. Fred, por otra parte, se enorgullecía de no mentir nunca; de no recurrir siquiera a pequeñas mentiras insignificantes. Con frecuencia se encogía de hombros y hacía muecas significativas ante lo que denominaba los cuentos chinos de Rosamond (solo los hermanos son capaces de asociar semejantes ideas con una hermosa muchacha); y mejor que incurrir en falsedad, prefería pasar algún apuro y practicar la moderación. Una fuerte presión interna de este tipo le había llevado a hacer a su madre depositaria de las ochenta libras. Fue una pena que no se las diera inmediatamente al señor Garth; pero su intención era completar la suma con otras sesenta y, para lograrlo, había guardado veinte en su propio bolsillo a manera de simiente que, plantada con discernimiento y regada con suerte, podía producir más del triple: un volumen muy modesto de multiplicación cuando el campo de la siembra es el alma infinita de un caballero joven, con todos los numerales a su disposición.

Fred no era un jugador inveterado: no padecía esa enfermedad específica a causa de la cual concentrar toda la energía nerviosa en la suerte o en la evitación de un riesgo llega a ser algo tan necesario como la copa para el borracho; solo tenía esa tendencia a una difusa forma del juego, sin intensidad alcohólica, que se difunde por el cuerpo con la sangre más sana, la alimentada por el quilo, y que mantiene una alegre actividad imaginativa que moldea los acontecimientos de acuerdo con los deseos y que, como no abriga temores acerca de su propio clima, solo ve las ventajas que supone para los demás subirse a bordo. La esperanza encuentra satisfacción en hacer todo género de envites, porque el éxito se ve como seguro; y el placer aumenta cuando se ofrece a otros el mayor número posible de participaciones en la recompensa. A Fred le gustaba jugar, especialmente al billar, como le gustaba cazar y tomar parte en carreras de obstáculos; y aún le gustaba más si daba la coincidencia de que necesitaba dinero y esperaba ganar. Pero las veinte libras de simiente habían sido plantadas en vano en el atractivo campo verde —todo lo que de ellas, al menos, no se había perdido al caer al borde del camino— y Fred se encontró muy cerca de la fecha de vencimiento y sin otro dinero disponible que las ochenta libras entregadas en depósito a su madre. El caballo falto de resuello que montaba era un regalo que le había hecho su tío Featherstone hacía tiempo: su padre le permitía siempre tener caballo, ya que las mismas costumbres del señor Vincy le hacían considerarlo como una exigencia razonable incluso para un hijo bastante exasperante. Aquel caballo era, por tanto, propiedad de Fred, y en su deseo de hacer frente al inminente pagaré, el joven Vincy decidió sacrificar una posesión sin la cual desde luego la vida valdría muy poco. Tomó tal resolución con sensación de heroísmo: heroísmo al que le forzaban el temor a faltar a la palabra dada al señor Garth, su amor por Mary y lo mucho que le intimidaba la opinión de esta. Se pondría en camino para la feria de caballos de Houndsley, que debía celebrarse a la mañana siguiente y… ¿vendería sin más el caballo, regresando con el dinero en la diligencia? Bueno; difícilmente conseguiría más de treinta libras por aquel jaco y no había forma de saber lo que podía pasar: sería estúpido renunciar a la buena suerte de antemano. Era casi imposible que no surgiera alguna buena oportunidad; cuanto más pensaba en ello menos probable le parecía que no se le presentara una buena oportunidad y aún menos razonable no ir provisto con la pólvora y la munición necesarias para abatirla. Se trasladaría a Houndsley en compañía de Bambridge y de Horrock, el veterinario, y, sin preguntarles directamente, sacaría, casi con seguridad, algún provecho de su opinión. Antes de partir Fred reclamó a su madre las ochenta libras.

La mayoría de las personas que vieron salir de Middlemarch al joven Vincy en compañía de Bambridge y de Horrock, camino de la feria de caballos de Houndsley, pensaron que iba como de costumbre en busca de diversiones; y de no haber sido por la desacostumbrada presencia en su imaginación de problemas graves y urgentes, él también habría pensado que estaba haciendo todo lo que cabe esperar de un muchacho alegre por naturaleza. Teniendo en cuenta que Fred no era en absoluto vulgar, que sentía escaso aprecio por los modales y las maneras de los jóvenes que no habían estudiado en la universidad y que había escrito estrofas tan bucólicas y poco voluptuosas como su forma de tocar la flauta, el atractivo que hallaba en Bambridge y Horrock es un hecho muy interesante que incluso el amor a los caballos no bastaría para explicar de manera satisfactoria sin recurrir al misterioso poder de las denominaciones, que tanto influyen sobre las elecciones de los humanos. Bajo cualquier otro nombre distinto del de «diversión», el trato con los señores Bambridge y Horrock se habría considerado sin duda alguna monótono; y llegar con ellos a Houndsley en una tarde de llovizna, desmontar en El León Rojo en una calle ensombrecida por el polvo de carbón y cenar en una habitación adornada con un mapa del condado cubierto de mugre, un mal retrato de un caballo anónimo en un establo, su majestad Jorge IV de cuerpo entero y con corbatín, y varias escupideras de plomo, podría haber parecido una ocupación desagradable de no haber sido por la fuerza confortadora de la nomenclatura que calificaba de «festivas» todas aquellas actividades.

El señor Horrock era, desde luego, un hombre tan manifiestamente insondable que ofrecía mucho juego

para la imaginación. La ropa que llevaba establecía de inmediato una interesante asociación con los caballos (determinando, por ejemplo, que el ala del sombrero estuviera ligeramente doblada hacia arriba y evitara así toda posibilidad de que se inclinara hacia abajo) y la naturaleza le había proporcionado un rostro que, gracias a unos ojos mongólicos y a una nariz, boca y barbilla que seguían la moderada curva ascendente del ala del sombrero, creaba el efecto de una discreta e inamovible sonrisa escéptica, que es de todas las expresiones la más capaz de tiranizar a un espíritu susceptible y que, cuando va acompañada del debido silencio, puede forjar una reputación de insuperable inteligencia, infinitas reservas de humor —demasiado denso para fluir y probablemente en estado de sólido inamovible—, y de un juicio crítico que, si uno tuviera la fortuna de conocer, resultaría sin duda incontrovertible, con exclusión de todos los demás. Es una fisonomía que se encuentra en todas las profesiones, pero que quizá nunca tenga tanto poder sobre la juventud inglesa como cuando se encarna en un experto en caballos.

El señor Horrock, ante una pregunta de Fred sobre los espolones de su caballo, se volvió hacia un lado en la silla y contempló los movimientos del animal por espacio de tres minutos, luego giró hacia adelante, dio un tirón de su propia brida y guardó silencio, con el mismo perfil escéptico de antes.

El papel así desempeñado por el señor Horrock en el diálogo resultó en extremo eficaz, y en Fred se desató una mezcla de pasiones: el loco deseo de forzar a Horrock a dar su opinión y el temor a perder las ventajas de su amistad si lo intentaba. Siempre cabía la posibilidad de que Horrock dijera algo de inapreciable valor en el momento oportuno.

El señor Bambridge tenía unos modales más abiertos y daba la impresión de hacer a los demás partícipes de sus ideas con liberalidad. Era un hombre de voz potente, robusto y del que se hablaba a veces calificándolo de «licencioso»: sobre todo en el uso de palabras malsonantes, en la bebida, y por la frecuencia con que pegaba a su mujer. Algunas personas que habían perdido dinero con él lo consideraban una persona cruel; pero el señor Bambridge tenía la venta de caballos por la más hermosa de las artes y podría haber defendido de manera razonable su absoluta falta de conexión con la moralidad. Era sin duda alguna un hombre próspero que soportaba la bebida mejor que otros la temperancia y que, en conjunto, florecía con la misma facilidad que las malas hierbas. Su conversación, sin embargo, era limitada y, como la vieja y hermosa canción *Gotas de aguardiente*, al cabo de algún tiempo producía una sensación repetitiva que podía marear a cabezas algo débiles. Se consideraba que una pequeña dosis del señor Bambridge daba tono y personalidad a varios círculos de Middlemarch; y era una figura distinguida en el bar y en los billares de El Dragón Verde. Sabía algunas anécdotas sobre los héroes de los hipódromos y diferentes estratagemas brillantes de marqueses y vizcondes que parecían probar cómo la sangre azul afirma su preeminencia incluso entre tahúres, si bien la prolija capacidad de retención de su memoria parecía manifestarse sobre todo en lo relacionado con los caballos que él personalmente había comprado y vendido; a pesar del paso de los años, los kilómetros que podían recorrer en muy poco tiempo sin dar muestras de cansancio seguían siendo tema de apasionadas aseveraciones, en las que el señor Bambridge colaboraba con la imaginación de sus oyentes jurando solemnemente que nunca había visto nada parecido. En pocas palabras: el señor Bambridge era un hombre que sabía vivir y un compañero alegre.

Guiado por su perspicacia, Fred no explicó a sus amigos que iba a Houndsley con idea de vender su caballo: deseaba enterarse indirectamente de su auténtica opinión, sin darse cuenta de que una opinión sincera era la última cosa que cabía esperar de tan eminentes críticos. Entre las debilidades del señor Bambridge no se contaba el adular sin justificación. Nunca se había dado cuenta con tanta claridad de que aquel pobre bayo hacía un ruido tan violento al respirar que se necesitaba una palabra muy expresiva y malsonante para hacerle justicia.

—¡Te salió mal la jugada cuando cambiaste de caballo sin acudir a mí, Vincy! No has montado en toda tu vida un caballo mejor que aquel zaino, pero lo cambiaste por ese bruto. Si lo pones al galope hace más ruido que veinte sierras. Solo he oído a uno que roncara más fuerte en mi vida y era un ruano: propiedad de Pegwell, aquel que se dedicaba a la compraventa de maíz; solía llevarlo en la calesa hace siete años y quería que yo me quedara con él, pero le dije: «Muchas gracias, Peg, pero no comercio con instrumentos de viento». Eso fue lo que dije. Es un chiste que se hizo famoso y lo contaron por todo el país. Pero, ¡qué demonios!, aquel caballo era una trompeta de juguete comparado con el tuyo.

—Vaya, acaba usted de decir que era peor que el mío —dijo Fred, más irritable que de costumbre.

—En ese caso he dicho una mentira —respondió el señor Bambridge, con gran convicción—. No sabría con cuál de los dos quedarme.

Fred espoleó a su caballo y trotaron durante un breve espacio de tiempo. Al disminuir de nuevo la marcha, el señor Bambridge dijo:

—Aquel ruano trotaba mejor que el tuyo.

—Pues yo estoy muy satisfecho con sus aires, desde luego —dijo Fred, que necesitaba recordar todo el tiempo que se encontraba en compañía de gente alegre para no perder el buen humor—. Horrock, ¿no le parece que tiene un trote excelente?

El señor Horrock siguió mirando hacia adelante y manifestó una neutralidad tan completa como si fuera un retrato pintado por un gran maestro.

Fred abandonó la engañosa esperanza de conseguir una opinión sincera; pero, al seguir reflexionando, llegó a la conclusión de que el menosprecio de Bambridge y el silencio de Horrock eran, en realidad, esperanzadores e indicaban que tenían sobre el caballo mejor opinión de la que aparentaban.

Aquella misma noche, efectivamente, antes de que la feria se hubiese instalado, Fred creyó ver una favorable oportunidad para desprenderse con ventaja de su jaco, pero una oportunidad que le hizo congratularse de lo previsor que se había mostrado trayendo consigo las ochenta libras. Un joven granjero, conocido del señor Bambridge, se presentó en El León Rojo y empezó a hablar de la venta de un caballo de caza, al que presentó de inmediato como Diamond, dando por sentado que se trataba de un personaje por todos conocido. Él solo deseaba un caballo de silla, que pudiera tirar de un vehículo cuando fuera necesario, porque estaba a punto de casarse e iba a abandonar la caza. El caballo en cuestión se hallaba en el establo de un amigo a poca distancia; todavía quedaba tiempo para que los caballeros lo vieran antes de anochecer. Para llegar al establo había que atravesar una calle trasera tan repulsiva como cualquier callejón de aquella época insalubre en que tan fácil era que alguien se envenenara sin necesidad de medicinas. Fred no se había fortalecido contra la repugnancia con aguardiente, como sus amigos, pero la esperanza de haber encontrado por fin el caballo que le permitiría ganar dinero fue estímulo suficiente para hacerle recorrer de nuevo el mismo camino a primera hora de la mañana. Estaba convencido de que, si no cerraba el trato con el granjero, lo haría Bambridge; se dio cuenta de que lo apurado de su situación había afilado su agudeza, proporcionándole todo el vuelo imaginativo que nace de la sospecha. Bambridge había criticado a Diamond de una manera impensable (tratándose del caballo de un amigo) para no tener intención de comprarlo; todos los que examinaron el animal —Horrock incluido— quedaron sin lugar a dudas impresionados con sus méritos. Para obtener provecho de la compañía de aquellos hombres, era necesario saber sacar conclusiones propias, en lugar de ser un bobo que acepta las cosas literalmente. El caballo era rucio y Fred sabía que el criado de lord Medlicote estaba buscando precisamente un animal de aquellas características. Después de todas sus críticas, Bambridge dejó escapar, en el curso de la velada, cuando el granjero estaba ausente, que había visto dar ochenta libras por caballos peores que aquel. Es cierto que después se contradijo veinte veces pero, cuando una persona sabe qué es lo que puede ser verdad, está capacitada para valorar las afirmaciones de un entendido. Y Fred no podía por menos de conceder cierto peso a su propia opinión. El granjero se había detenido a examinar la respetable aunque jadeante montura de Fred el tiempo suficiente para demostrar que le parecía digna de consideración y entraba dentro de lo probable que la aceptara, con un suplemento de veinticinco libras, a cambio de *Diamond*. Fred, en ese caso, al vender su nuevo caballo por un mínimo de ochenta libras, se encontraría con cincuenta y cinco de más en el bolsillo como resultado de la transacción, reuniendo ya ciento treinta y cinco con vistas a la redención del pagaré; de manera que el señor Garth solo tendría que hacerse cargo momentáneamente de un déficit de veinticinco libras. Mientras se estaba vistiendo a toda prisa por la mañana, Fred vio con tanta claridad la importancia de no perder aquella única oportunidad que ni Bambridge ni Horrock habrían conseguido disuadirlo; aquellas personas tan astutas se traían sin duda entre manos algo más sustancioso que los intereses de un muchacho. Cuando se trata de caballos, la desconfianza es el único camino seguro. Pero el escepticismo, como todos sabemos, no puede aplicarse hasta sus últimas consecuencias, porque la vida entera llegaría a detenerse: tenemos que creer en algo y obrar en consecuencia, y cualquiera que sea el nombre que le demos a ese algo, se trata en última instancia de nuestro propio juicio, incluso cuando se presenta como la más servil dependencia de la opinión de otro. Fred creía en la excelencia del trato que iba a hacer e, incluso antes de que la feria empezase a funcionar, había tomado ya posesión del rucio, pagando como precio su antiguo caballo y treinta libras; solo cinco más de lo que él esperaba.

Pero se sentía un poco preocupado y cansado, quizá por su propio debate interior y, sin esperar a las alegrías adicionales de la feria, emprendió a solas el viaje de veintidós kilómetros, dispuesto a tomárselo con calma y a no cansar al caballo.

Capítulo XXIV

El pesar del ofensor alivia muy poco
al que lleva la pesada cruz de la ofensa.

SHAKESPEARE, *Sonetos 34*

Siento tener que decir que tan solo tres días después de los favorables acontecimientos de Houndsley, Fred Vincy estaba más desanimado que nunca. No es que le fallara el posible comprador para su caballo, sino que, antes de que pudiera cerrar el trato con el criado de lord Medlicote, Diamond, sobre el que descansaba la esperanza de conseguir ochenta libras, había exhibido, sin previo aviso, una perversa y violentísima tendencia a cocear y después de estar a punto de matar al mozo, terminó por lisiarse gravemente al enganchársele una pata en la cuerda que colgaba por encima de la pared de tablas de la cuadra. Aquello tenía tan poco remedio como la aparición del mal genio después del matrimonio, algo de lo que, por supuesto, los compañeros de siempre se habían percatado antes de la ceremonia. Por alguna razón Fred no fue capaz de mostrar su habitual flexibilidad ante aquel golpe adverso de la fortuna: comprendió que solo tenía cincuenta libras, que no contaba con la menor posibilidad de conseguir más dinero por el momento y que el pagaré de ciento sesenta iba a ser presentado al cabo de cinco días. Incluso aunque recurriera a su padre con la súplica de que se le evitara semejante pérdida al señor Garth, Fred se daba cuenta, lleno de dolorosa compunción, de que su padre se negaría, indignado, a librar al señor Garth de lo que calificaría de incitación al derroche y al engaño. El joven Vincy se sentía tan deprimido que tan solo se le ocurrió ir directamente al señor Garth y contarle la triste verdad, haciendo al mismo tiempo entrega de las cincuenta libras, para que al menos aquella suma saliera de sus manos sin exponerse a nuevos peligros. Su padre, por encontrarse en el almacén, no estaba al tanto del accidente: cuando lo supiera protestaría, colérico, de que se hubiese metido al animal en su cuadra; y antes de superar aquella molestia de menor cuantía, Fred quería salir a enfrentarse con la más importante con todo su valor intacto. Hizo ensillar el jaco de su padre, porque había decidido que, después de hablar con el señor Garth, se trasladaría a Stone Court para confesarle toda la verdad a Mary. De hecho, es probable que sin la existencia de Mary y del amor que sentía por ella su conciencia se hubiera mostrado mucho menos activa tanto a la hora de recordarle con insistencia su deuda como a la de exigirle que no se evitara molestias mediante el habitual sistema de retrasar cualquier tarea desagradable y actuara, por el contrario, con toda la rapidez y sencillez de que fuera capaz. Incluso seres humanos mucho más enérgicos que Fred Vincy conservan la mitad de su rectitud en el alma de la persona que más quieren. «Se ha derrumbado el teatro de todas mis acciones», dijo un personaje antiguo al morir su mejor amigo; y son muy afortunadas las personas que disfrutan de un teatro cuyo público les pide que den lo mejor de sí mismos. El hecho de que Mary Garth tuviera unas ideas tan claras sobre las cualidades que hacían admirable a una persona fue sin duda decisivo para Fred Vincy en aquel momento.

El señor Garth no estaba en su despacho y Fred se dirigió a caballo a su domicilio, que quedaba a las afueras de Middlemarch: un sitio acogedor con árboles frutales delante de la casa; un edificio hecho a medias de madera, de forma irregular y pasado de moda, que era una granja antes de que la ciudad se extendiera, pero que se hallaba ahora rodeada por el jardín privado característico de la gente de ciudad. Sentimos más afecto por nuestros hogares si tienen fisonomía propia y ese era el caso en esta ocasión. Los Garth, que constituían una familia bastante numerosa, porque Mary tenía cuatro hermanos y una hermana, sentían gran cariño por su vieja casa, cuyos mejores muebles habían vendido hacía ya mucho tiempo. A

Fred también le gustaba, y la conocía de memoria, incluido el desván, que siempre olía deliciosamente a manzanas y a membrillos, y hasta entonces nunca había encaminado sus pasos hacia ella sin agradables expectativas; pero ahora su corazón latía con desasosiego pensando en que, con toda probabilidad, tendría que hacer su confesión delante de la señora Garth, quien le inspiraba bastante más temor reverente que su marido. No es que la madre de Mary tuviese inclinación al sarcasmo ni a las agudezas irrefrenables, como le sucedía a su hija. En su situación presente de madre de familia, la señora Garth, al menos, nunca se comprometía hablando de manera precipitada; después de llevar, como ella decía, el yugo durante su juventud, había aprendido a dominarse. Poseía ese discernimiento poco común que permite reconocer lo que es inalterable, sometiéndose sin rechistar. Aunque admiraba las virtudes de su marido, entendió desde muy pronto su incapacidad para defender sus propios intereses, aceptando las consecuencias con alegría. Fue lo bastante magnánima para renunciar a enorgullecerse de las teteras o de los volantes en los trajes de sus hijas y nunca vertía en los oídos de sus vecinas confidencias patéticas acerca de la falta de prudencia del señor Garth o del dinero que podría haber ganado si hubiera sido como otros hombres. De aquí que sus vecinas la considerasen orgullosa o excéntrica y hablaran a veces de ella a sus maridos llamándola «tu maravillosa señora Garth». La madre de Mary, por su parte, tampoco estaba completamente libre de criticarlas, ya que era una persona más instruida que la mayoría de las matronas de Middlemarch y —¿dónde se hallará la mujer intachable?— tendía a mostrarse un tanto severa con su propio sexo, que en su opinión estaba modelado para vivir en completa subordinación. Por otra parte, manifestaba una indulgencia desproporcionada ante las faltas de los hombres, y se le oía decir con frecuencia que eran cosa natural. También hay que señalar su oposición un tanto extremada a lo que consideraba locuras: el paso de institutriz a ama de casa había quedado grabado quizá con nitidez un poco excesiva en su conciencia y olvidaba muy pocas veces que, si bien su gramática y su acento se hallaban por encima del nivel de Middlemarch, su cofia era de lo más corriente y que ella en persona preparaba la comida familiar, además de zurcir todas las medias y calcetines. En ocasiones había aceptado alumnos a los que daba clase al modo peripatético, haciendo que la fuesen siguiendo de un lado a otro por la cocina con el libro o la pizarra. Consideraba instructivo que sus discípulos pudieran ver cómo era capaz de lograr una excelente espuma mientras corregía sus equivocaciones «sin mirar»; cómo una mujer remangada hasta por encima del codo podía saberlo todo sobre el modo subjuntivo o la zona tórrida; cómo, en pocas palabras, podía tener «educación» y otras buenas cosas que terminaban en «ción» y dignas de ser pronunciadas con énfasis, sin ser una muñeca inservible. Cuando hacía observaciones en ese sentido edificante, aparecía en su frente un leve fruncimiento lleno de firmeza que, sin embargo, no bastaba para eliminar la expresión benévola de su rostro; en cuanto a sus palabras, que iban saliendo de su boca como si formasen parte de una procesión, las pronunciaba con una voz grave, cálida y bien modulada. La señora Garth, mujer ejemplar, tenía ciertamente sus facetas peculiares, pero su carácter disculpaba sus rarezas, como un excelente vino disculpa el sabor del pellejo que lo alberga.

Fred Vincy inspiraba a la señora Garth sentimientos maternales y siempre había estado dispuesta a excusar sus errores, aunque probablemente no hubiera disculpado a Mary por prometerse con él, ya que su hija quedaba incluida en el juicio más riguroso que aplicaba a su propio sexo. Pero el hecho mismo de su excepcional debilidad por él hacía aún más dura la inevitable pérdida de prestigio que iba a producirse de inmediato. Y las circunstancias de su visita resultaron aún más desagradables para Fred de lo previsto; porque Caleb Garth había salido muy temprano para examinar algunas reparaciones en un lugar no muy distante. A ciertas horas, la señora Garth se hallaba siempre en la cocina, y aquella mañana atendía allí a varias ocupaciones al mismo tiempo: hacía sus trabajos de repostería en la bien fregada mesa de pino situada en un extremo de la espaciosa habitación, observaba, a través de una puerta abierta, a Sally, que iba y venía del horno a la artesa de la masa, y daba lecciones a su hijo e hija más jóvenes, de pie frente a ella, junto a la mesa, con sus libros y pizarras delante. Un barreño y un tendedero portátil indicaban que también estaba en marcha el lavado intermitente de prendas de poco tamaño.

La señora Garth, remangada hasta por encima del codo, manejando hábilmente el rodillo de amasar y dando pellizcos ornamentales a las piezas ya terminadas al tiempo que exponía con fervor gramatical cuáles eran las opiniones correctas sobre la concordancia de verbos y pronombres con «sustantivos de multitud o que significaran muchos», era un espectáculo simpático y divertido. La madre de Mary tenía el mismo pelo rizado y rostro cuadrado que su hija, pero era mejor parecida, de rasgos más delicados, piel muy blanca, figura sólidamente matronil y notable firmeza en la mirada. Con su nívea toca con volantes recordaba a una de esas deliciosas francesas que todos hemos visto en el mercado, con un cesto al brazo. Mirándola, resultaba lógico desear que la hija llegara a ser como la madre, lo cual es una ventaja para el futuro equivalente a una dote, ya que con demasiada frecuencia la madre aparece detrás de la hija como una

malévola profecía: «Será muy pronto como soy yo ahora».

—Vamos a repasar eso una vez más —dijo la señora Garth, haciendo incisiones en una tarta de manzana que parecía distraer a Ben, un enérgico muchachito con expresión muy seria, impidiendo que prestara la debida atención a la clase—. «Sin perder de vista la importancia de la palabra como transmisora de la unidad o pluralidad de la idea»… dime de nuevo lo que eso significa, Ben.

(La señora Garth, como la mayoría de los educadores famosos, tenía sus sistemas favoritos, algo antiguos, y en el caso de una catástrofe general de la sociedad, habría tratado de sostener a su Lindley Murray por encima de las olas).

—Bueno… Significa… que uno debe pensar en lo que quiere decir —dijo Ben, con bastante malhumor —. No me gusta nada la gramática. ¿Para qué sirve?

—Para enseñarte a hablar y a escribir correctamente, a fin de que los demás te entiendan —dijo la señora Garth, con severa precisión—. ¿Te gustaría hablar como el viejo Job?

—Sí —dijo Ben, con terquedad—; es más divertido. Dice «haiga», que se entiende igual de bien que «haya».

—Pero cuando dice «hay una oveja en el jardín» —intervino Letty, con aire de superioridad—, podrías pensar que se refiere a un barco[67] salido del mar, por lo mal que habla.

—No; solo se le ocurriría pensarlo a un tonto —dijo Ben—. ¿Cómo iba a llegar hasta aquí un barco?

—Eso se refiere tan solo a la pronunciación, que es lo menos importante de la gramática —dijo la señora Garth—. Esa cáscara de manzana es para que se la coman los cerdos, Ben; si te la comes tendré que darles tu ración de tarta. Job solo tiene que hablar de cosas muy sencillas. ¿Cómo crees que escribirías o hablarías de algo más difícil, si no supieras más gramática que él? Usarías palabras equivocadas, pondrías otras en el sitio que no les corresponde y, en lugar de conseguir que la gente te entendiera, lograrías que se apartaran de ti considerándote un pesado. ¿Qué harías entonces?

—Me daría lo mismo, no tendría más que irme —dijo Ben, convencido de que se trataba de un desenlace muy conveniente, tratándose de la gramática.

—Ya veo que estás cansado y que empiezas a ponerte tonto —dijo la señora Garth, acostumbrada a aquellos razonamientos obstruccionistas por parte de su hijo varón. Terminada la repostería se dirigió hacia el tendedero portátil y dijo—: Ven aquí y repíteme la historia que os conté el miércoles sobre Cincinato.

—¡Eso lo sé! Era un granjero —dijo Ben.

—Vamos, Ben, era un romano… Déjame contarla a mí —intervino Letty, usando el codo de forma beligerante.

—No seas tonta, era un granjero romano y estaba arando.

—Sí, pero antes… eso no era lo primero… la gente lo quería —dijo Letty.

—Bueno, pero tienes que decir el tipo de persona que era —insistió Ben—. Era un hombre prudente, como mi padre, y eso hizo que la gente buscara su consejo. Y era un hombre valiente y sabía luchar. Y lo mismo sucede con mi padre, ¿no es verdad, madre?

—Vamos, Ben, déjame contar la historia toda seguida, tal como madre nos la contó —dijo Letty, frunciendo el entrecejo—. Madre, por favor, dile a Ben que no hable.

—Letty, me avergüenzo de ti —replicó la señora Garth, escurriendo las tocas encima del barreño—. Cuando tu hermano empezó, debiste haber esperado a ver si no sabía contar la historia. ¡Qué aspecto tan desagradable tienes, empujando y frunciendo el entrecejo, como si quisieras imponerte a fuerza de codazos! Estoy segura de que a Cincinato le hubiese dolido mucho ver a una hija suya comportarse así. —La señora Garth pronunció esta frase terrible con gran majestad en la enunciación y Letty sintió que con aquella combinación de facundia reprimida y de descrédito generalizado, incluido el de los romanos, la vida era un asunto muy penoso—. Vamos a ver, Ben.

—Bueno… sí… eso es, había gran cantidad de peleas y todos eran muy duros de mollera y… no soy capaz de contarlo tal como tú lo hiciste… pero querían un hombre que fuera capitán y rey y todo lo demás…

—Dictador, vaya —dijo Letty, con aire ofendido y con el deseo de hacer que su madre se arrepintiera.

—¡Muy bien, dictador! —dijo Ben, despreciativamente—. Pero no es una buena palabra: no les dijo que escribieran en pizarras.

—Vamos, vamos, Ben, tú no eres tan ignorante —dijo la señora Garth, sin perder la seriedad—. ¡Escucha! Han llamado a la puerta. Corre a abrirla, Letty.

Era Fred el que llamaba; y cuando Letty dijo que su padre no había llegado aún, pero que su madre estaba en la cocina, Fred no vio escapatoria posible. No podía apartarse de su costumbre de ir a ver a la señora Garth en la cocina. En silencio, el joven Vincy pasó el brazo alrededor del cuello de Letty y se dirigió

con ella hacia la cocina sin obsequiarla con sus habituales chistes y caricias.

A la señora Garth le sorprendió ver a Fred a aquella hora, pero la sorpresa no era un sentimiento que se sintiera inclinada a expresar y solo dijo, siguiendo tranquilamente con su trabajo:

—¿Tú tan temprano, Fred? Estás muy pálido. ¿Ha sucedido algo?

—Quiero hablar con el señor Garth —dijo el joven Vincy, que no se hallaba todavía en condiciones de decir nada más—, y también con usted —añadió, después de una breve pausa, porque se imaginaba que la señora Garth estaba al corriente de lo del pagaré y que al final tendría que hablar de ello en su presencia, si es que no se veía obligado a contárselo a solas.

—Caleb estará de vuelta dentro de unos minutos —dijo la señora Garth, pensando que se trataba de algún conflicto entre Fred y su padre—. No tardará mucho, porque tiene sobre la mesa un trabajo que debe terminar esta misma mañana. ¿Te importa quedarte conmigo mientras acabo lo que estoy haciendo?

—Pero no hace falta que sigamos con Cincinato, ¿verdad? —dijo Ben, que le había quitado a Fred la fusta y estaba probando su eficacia con el gato.

—No, id fuera. Pero deja la fusta. ¿No te da vergüenza pegar al viejo *Tortoise*? Por favor, Fred, quítale la fusta.

—Vamos, muchacho, dámela —dijo Fred, extendiendo la mano.

—¿Me dejarás montar hoy a caballo? —dijo Ben, entregando la fusta con aire de no estar obligado a hacerlo.

—Hoy no… otro día. El caballo que traigo no es el mío.

—¿Vas a ir a ver a Mary?

—Sí, creo que sí —dijo Fred, sintiendo una dolorosa punzada.

—Dile que venga pronto a casa, para jugar a las prendas y divertirnos.

—¡Ya basta, Ben! Vete de una vez —dijo la señora Garth, viendo que Fred estaba molesto.

—¿No tiene usted ahora más alumnos que Letty y Ben, señora Garth? —dijo Fred cuando los niños se hubieron marchado e hizo falta decir algo para pasar el tiempo. Todavía no estaba seguro de si debía esperar al señor Garth o aprovechar cualquier buena oportunidad en la conversación para confesar la verdad a su esposa, darle el dinero y marcharse.

—Tengo otra… solo una. Fanny Hackbutt viene a las once y media. Ahora no gano mucho —dijo la señora Garth, sonriendo—. Estoy en el punto más bajo en cuestión de alumnos. Pero he ahorrado un poquito, noventa y dos libras, para pagar el aprendizaje de Alfred. Ahora ya puede ir con el señor Hanmer; tiene la edad precisa.

Aquello no era un buen preámbulo para recibir después la noticia de que el señor Garth iba a perder de un momento a otro noventa y dos libras y aún más. Fred guardó silencio.

—Los caballeros jóvenes que van a la universidad resultan bastante más costosos —continuó la señora Garth inocentemente, descosiendo el dobladillo de una gorra—. Y Caleb cree que Alfred llegará a ser un ingeniero de renombre: quiere que el chico tenga su oportunidad. ¡Ahí está! Le oigo llegar. Vamos con él al salón, ¿no te parece?

Cuando entraron, Caleb se había quitado el sombrero y estaba sentado ante su escritorio.

—¿Eres tú, Fred? —dijo el padre de Mary con tono levemente sorprendido y la pluma en la mano aún sin mojar—. Has venido muy temprano. —Pero al advertir la ausencia de la habitual expresión alegre en el rostro de Fred, añadió inmediatamente—: ¿Ha sucedido algo en tu casa… algo importante?

—Sí, señor Garth, he venido a decirle algo que me temo le hará tener muy mala opinión de mí. He venido a decirles a usted y a la señora Garth que no puedo cumplir mi palabra. No he conseguido el dinero para cubrir el pagaré. He tenido mala suerte; solo he conseguido cincuenta libras en lugar de las ciento sesenta.

Mientras hablaba, Fred había sacado los billetes y los fue colocando en el pupitre delante del señor Garth. Había estallado de inmediato, contando los hechos tal como eran, sintiéndose infantilmente desgraciado y sin recursos verbales. La señora Garth, muda de asombro, miraba a su marido en busca de una explicación. Caleb se sonrojó y, después de una pequeña pausa, dijo:

—No te lo había contado, Susan, pero respaldé con mi firma un pagaré de ciento sesenta libras. Fred me aseguró que cuando llegara el momento podría saldar la deuda,

Hubo un cambio evidente en el rostro de la señora Garth, pero fue como si se produjera en el agua bajo una superficie que permaneciese en calma.

—Supongo que le has pedido el resto del dinero a tu padre y se ha negado a dártelo —dijo, mirando fijamente a Fred.

—No —respondió Fred, mordiéndose el labio y hablando con más dificultad—; pero sé que no serviría

de nada pedírselo; y a no ser que hubiera alguna esperanza, no me gustaría mencionar el nombre del señor Garth en este asunto.

—La verdad es que estamos en un mal momento —dijo Caleb, con su aire dubitativo, mirando los billetes de banco y manoseando nerviosamente el papel que tenía entre las manos—; se nos vienen encima las Navidades… Ahora mismo me encuentro en apuros. ¿Comprendes? Tengo que recortar gastos como un sastre con un metro demasiado corto. ¿Qué vamos a hacer, Susan? Necesitaré hasta el último céntimo que tenemos en el banco. ¡Son ciento diez libras, diantre!

—Te daré las noventa y dos que había guardado para pagar el aprendizaje de Alfred —dijo la señora Garth, con tono serio y decidido, aunque un oído sutil podría haber notado un ligero temblor en algunas de las palabras—. Y estoy segura de que a estas alturas Mary habrá ahorrado ya veinte de su sueldo. Te las prestará.

La señora Garth no había vuelto a mirar a Fred y no calculaba en absoluto qué palabras debía usar para herirlo de la manera más eficaz. Como mujer excéntrica que era, estaba por el momento absorta en considerar qué era lo que había que hacer y no imaginaba que esa meta pudiera alcanzarse mejor con frases enconadas o explosiones de mal humor. Pero había logrado que Fred sintiera por vez primera la punzada del remordimiento. Aunque parezca extraño, su sufrimiento en aquel asunto había surgido casi exclusivamente hasta entonces del hecho de que su conducta pareciera deshonrosa y le hiciera perder la estima de los Garth; no había pensado en las molestias y posibles perjuicios que faltar a su palabra pudiera ocasionarles. Porque tal ejercicio de imaginación acerca de las necesidades de otras personas no es frecuente entre caballeros jóvenes con esperanzas. De hecho, a la mayoría de nosotros se nos educa con la idea de que el motivo más elevado para no cometer una injusticia es algo totalmente ajeno a los seres que sufrirían esa injusticia. Pero en aquel momento Fred se vio de repente como un vulgar sinvergüenza que estaba desposeyendo a dos mujeres de sus ahorros.

—Terminaré pagándolo todo, señora Garth. Puede estar segura —logró tartamudear.

—Sí, acabarás pagándolo —dijo la señora Garth, quien, como le desagradaban de manera especial las palabras altisonantes en los momentos difíciles, no logró evitar un comentario irónico—: pero un muchacho no puede hacer su aprendizaje en el futuro; tiene que hacerlo a los quince años. —Nunca se había sentido tan poco inclinada a disculpar a Fred.

—Yo soy el más culpable, Susan —dijo Caleb—. Fred prometió encontrar el dinero. Pero yo no tenía que haber respaldado el pagaré. Supongo que has mirado bien a tu alrededor y has hecho uso de todos los medios honrados —añadió, clavando sus compasivos ojos grises en Fred. Caleb era demasiado delicado para mencionar por su nombre al señor Featherstone.

—Sí, lo he intentado todo… de verdad. Habría tenido ciento treinta libras de no haber sido por una desgracia con un caballo que estaba a punto de vender. Mi tío me dio ochenta y pagué treinta, además de mi caballo, para conseguir otro que iba a vender por ochenta o más (tenía intención de pasarme sin montura), pero resultó de muy mal genio y se lastimó dando coces. Quisiera que los caballos y yo nos hubiésemos ido al infierno antes que jugarles a ustedes esta mala pasada. No hay ninguna otra persona por la que sienta tanto cariño: usted y la señora Garth han sido siempre muy buenos conmigo. Pero no sirve de nada decir todo esto. De ahora en adelante siempre pensarán que soy un sinvergüenza.

Fred se dio la vuelta y salió de la habitación, consciente de estar comportándose de manera poco varonil y sintiendo confusamente que su compunción no le resultaba de mucha utilidad a los Garth. Marido y mujer lo vieron montar a caballo y alejarse rápidamente atravesando el portón.

—He sufrido una desilusión con Fred Vincy —dijo la señora Garth—. Nunca hubiese creído que fuera capaz de mezclarte a ti en sus deudas. Sabía que gastaba demasiado, pero nunca se me ocurrió que pudiera ser tan ruin para hacer que cargara con el mochuelo el más viejo de sus amigos, que es quien menos puede permitirse perder ese dinero.

—Me porté como un estúpido, Susan.

—Tienes mucha razón —dijo su mujer, asintiendo con la cabeza y sonriendo—. Pero yo no habría ido a pregonarlo a la plaza del mercado. ¿Por qué tienes que ocultarme esas cosas? Te pasa lo mismo con los botones; dejas que se te caigan sin decírmelo y luego sales a la calle con los puños de la camisa colgando. Si lo hubiera sabido quizá habría preparado un plan mejor.

—Sé que es un golpe muy duro para ti, Susan —dijo Caleb, mirándola tiernamente—. No puedo resignarme a que pierdas el dinero que has ahorrado para Alfred con tantas dificultades.

—Es cierto que soy yo quien lo ha ahorrado, pero serás tú el que sufra las consecuencias, porque tendrás que ocuparte en persona de enseñar a tu hijo. Has de renunciar a tus malas costumbres. Algunos hombres se aficionan a beber y tú te has aficionado a trabajar sin que te paguen. Necesitas ser un poco menos

indulgente contigo mismo. E ir a ver a Mary para pedirle el dinero que tenga.

Caleb había echado la silla hacia atrás y estaba inclinado hacia adelante, agitando despacio la cabeza y juntando las puntas de los dedos con mucho cuidado.

—¡Pobre Mary! —dijo—. Susan —continuó en voz más baja—, tengo miedo de que se haya encariñado con Fred.

—¡Qué va! Siempre se ríe de él; y creo que Fred solo piensa en ella como hermana.

Caleb no respondió, pero en seguida se bajó los lentes, acercó la silla al escritorio y dijo:

—¡Al diablo con el pagaré!… ¡Ojalá estuviera a cien mil kilómetros de aquí! ¡Estas cosas son una absurda interrupción de los negocios!

La primera parte de aquella tirada incluía toda su provisión de maldiciones, y fue pronunciada con un suave gruñido fácil de imaginar. Pero sí sería difícil transmitir a quienes nunca le oyeron utilizar la palabra «negocios» el peculiar tono de ferviente veneración, de respeto religioso con que la envolvía, como un objeto de culto se envuelve en un lienzo con remate dorado.

Caleb Garth movía con frecuencia la cabeza al meditar sobre el valor, sobre la fuerza esencial de aquel trabajo de miles de cabezas y miles de manos con que se alimentaba, vestía y daba cobijo al cuerpo social. Era algo que se había apoderado de su imaginación en la adolescencia. Los ecos del gran martillo, allí donde se construían techos o quillas, los gritos con que se hacían señales los trabajadores, el rugir de las calderas, el estruendo de las máquinas, eran para él una música sublime; la tala y la carga de la madera y los enormes troncos vibrando como estrellas en la distancia a lo largo de la carretera, la grúa trabajando en el muelle, las mercancías apiladas en los almacenes, la precisión y variedad del esfuerzo muscular dondequiera que se realizaba un trabajo riguroso… todas aquellas imágenes de su juventud habían actuado sobre él como poesía, aunque sin la ayuda de los poetas, le habían proporcionado una filosofía sin la ayuda de los filósofos y una religión sin la ayuda de la teología. Su ambición más temprana fue participar de labor tan sublime a la que él dotaba de una dignidad peculiar aplicándole el nombre de «negocios»; y aunque pasó muy poco tiempo a las órdenes de un agrimensor y había sido fundamentalmente un autodidacta, sabía más de tierras, de construcción y de minería que la mayor parte de los especialistas del condado.

Su clasificación de los distintos empleos del ser humano era bastante tosca y, como las categorías de otros hombres más famosos, no se consideraría aceptable en estos tiempos nuestros más avanzados. El señor Garth dividía las ocupaciones en «negocios, política, prédica, enseñanza y diversión». Personalmente no tenía nada que decir contra las cuatro últimas, pero las miraba como un pagano respetuoso contempla a otros dioses distintos del suyo. De la misma manera, Caleb Garth tenía muy buena opinión de todas las clases sociales, pero a él no le habría gustado pertenecer a una en la que no tuviera un vínculo tan íntimo con los «negocios» que no se viera con frecuencia honrosamente condecorado con señales de polvo y argamasa, grasa de máquinas o tierra fértil de bosques y campos. Aunque siempre se había considerado cristiano ortodoxo y hubiese discutido sobre la gracia antecedente si el tema le era propuesto, creo que su dios no confesado eran los buenos planes prácticos, el trabajo bien hecho y el cumplir fielmente los compromisos adquiridos; su príncipe de las tinieblas era un trabajador negligente. Pero no existía espíritu de contradicción en Caleb Garth, y el mundo le parecía tan maravilloso que estaba dispuesto a aceptar todos los sistemas posibles, al igual que otros tantos firmamentos, si no suponían un obstáculo evidente al mejor drenaje de las tierras, a una sólida edificación, a una manera correcta de medir y a unas perforaciones juiciosas (en busca de carbón). De hecho, el señor Garth tenía un alma reverente a la que se añadía una poderosa inteligencia práctica. No era, sin embargo, capaz de manejar finanzas: conocía bien los valores, pero carecía de perspicacia para los resultados cuando se presentan en forma de pérdidas y ganancias y, después de descubrirlo a su propia costa, decidió renunciar a todas las formas de sus queridos «negocios» que exigieran ese talento. Se consagró enteramente a la diversidad de trabajos que podían hacerse sin manejar capital y se convirtió, dentro de su distrito, en uno de esos hombres impagables a los que todo el mundo escoge para que trabajen para ellos, porque el señor Garth hacía muy bien lo que se le encargaba y cobraba muy poco; con frecuencia nada en absoluto. No es extraño, por tanto, que los Garth fuesen pobres y «vivieran muy modestamente». A ellos, sin embargo, no les importaba.

Capítulo XXV

El amor no trata de darse gusto,
ni se preocupa de sí mismo,
sino que renuncia a su tranquilidad por el otro,
y edifica un cielo para desesperación del infierno

El amor solo busca complacerse,
sujetar al otro a su placer,
disfruta cuando el otro pierde la calma,
y crea un infierno a pesar del cielo.

W. BLAKE, *Cantos de experiencia*

Fred Vincy quería llegar a Stone Court cuando Mary no lo esperase y su tío no estuviera en el piso bajo: en ese caso, quizá la muchacha se encontrara a solas en el salón con revestimiento de madera. Dejó el caballo en el patio para evitar que hiciese ruido en la grava delante de la fachada principal y entró en el salón sin otro aviso que el chasquido del picaporte. Mary estaba en su rincón habitual, riéndose con las anécdotas de Johnson que cuenta la señora Piozzi[68], y al levantar la vista del libro su expresión seguía siendo aún risueña, aunque desapareció gradualmente al ver cómo Fred se acercaba sin hablar y se detenía delante de ella poniendo el codo en la repisa de la chimenea con aire de estar enfermo. También ella guardó silencio, limitándose a alzar la vista hacia él inquisitivamente.

—Mary —empezó el joven—, soy un sinvergüenza y un gandul.

—Creo que bastaría con uno de los dos epítetos —dijo Mary, tratando de sonreír, pero alarmada.

—Sé que nunca volverás a tener buena opinión de mí. Pensarás que soy mentiroso e insincero. Pensarás que nunca os he querido ni a ti ni a tu padre ni a tu madre. Ya sé que siempre piensas lo peor de mí.

—No puedo negar que pensaré todo eso de ti, Fred, si me das buenas razones para hacerlo. Pero, por favor, dime en seguida qué es lo que has hecho. Prefiero saber la dolorosa verdad y no tener que imaginármela.

—Debía dinero… ciento sesenta libras. Le pedí a tu padre que firmara un pagaré. Yo estaba convencido de que no iba a tener consecuencias. Prometí pagar el dinero y he tratado de hacerlo con todas mis fuerzas. Al final me ha perseguido la mala suerte (un caballo me ha salido mal) y solo dispongo de cincuenta libras. A mi padre no sirve de nada pedirle dinero: no me daría ni un céntimo. Y mi tío me regaló cien libras hace muy poco. De manera que no hay nada que hacer. Y ahora tu padre no dispone de dinero contante, tu madre tendrá que dar las noventa y dos libras que había ahorrado y dice que también van a necesitar tus ahorros. Ya ves qué…

—¡Pobres padres míos! —dijo Mary, al tiempo que se le llenaban los ojos de lágrimas, sin poder reprimir un pequeño sollozo. Contempló el futuro sin prestar atención a Fred y vio con claridad cuáles serían las consecuencias para su casa. El joven Vincy tampoco dijo nada durante unos momentos, sintiéndose más desgraciado que nunca.

—No te hubiera lastimado así por nada del mundo, Mary —dijo por fin—. Nunca podrás perdonarme.

—¿Qué importancia tiene que yo te perdone? —dijo Mary con apasionamiento—. ¿Es que eso hará que a mi madre le duela menos quedarse sin el dinero que ha ganado dando clases durante cuatro años para poder mandar a Alfred con el señor Hanmer? ¿Te parecerá que todo eso está bien si te perdono?

—Di lo que quieras, Mary. Todo me lo merezco.

—No quiero decir nada —dijo Mary, con más calma—; mi indignación es completamente inútil. —Se enjugó las lágrimas, dejó el libro a un lado, se puso en pie y cogió la costura.

Fred la siguió con la mirada, esperando tropezarse con la suya y de esa manera abrir un camino para su implorante contrición. ¡Pero no! Mary podía evitar fácilmente levantar los ojos.

—Claro que me preocupa que tu madre tenga que desprenderse del dinero —dijo él, cuando Mary estuvo sentada de nuevo y cosiendo deprisa—. Quería preguntarte una cosa… ¿No te parece que el señor Featherstone… si tú se lo dijeras… me refiero al aprendizaje de Alfred… adelantaría esa cantidad?

—A mi familia no le gusta pedir limosna, Fred. Preferimos trabajar. Además, dices que el señor Featherstone te ha dado cien libras hace poco. Es muy raro que haga regalos; a nosotros nunca nos los ha hecho. Estoy segura de que mi padre no le pediría nada; y aunque yo me decidiera a acudir a él, no serviría de nada.

—Soy muy desgraciado, Mary… Si supieras lo desgraciado que soy te compadecerías de mí.

—Hay otras cosas más importantes de las que compadecerse. Pero las personas egoístas siempre piensan que no hay nada en el mundo tan importante como sus molestias: es algo que compruebo todos los días.

—No es justo llamarme egoísta. Si supieras las cosas que hacen otros jóvenes, pensarías que estoy muy lejos de ser de los peores.

—Sé que las personas que gastan mucho sin saber cómo podrán pagarlo, tienen que ser egoístas. Siempre están pensando en lo que pueden conseguir y no en lo que otros pierden.

—Todo el mundo puede tener mala suerte, y encontrarse sin dinero para pagar aunque hayan estado decididos a hacerlo. No hay nadie mejor que tu padre y, sin embargo, también tuvo dificultades.

—¿Cómo te atreves a compararte con mi padre? —dijo Mary, con tono de profunda indignación—. Nunca ha tenido problemas por dedicarse a pensar en distracciones, sino porque siempre se entregaba en cuerpo y alma al trabajo que hacía para otras personas. Y lo ha pagado muy caro y ha tenido que esforzarse mucho para resarcir a todo el mundo de sus pérdidas.

—Y tú crees que yo nunca trataré de cumplir mis promesas. No es nada generoso pensar lo peor de una persona. Cuando se tiene algún poder sobre ella, hay que usarlo para que mejore; pero eso es lo que tú no haces nunca. De todas formas, me marcho —terminó Fred, lánguidamente—. Nunca volveré a hablar contigo de nada. Siento mucho todas las molestias que he causado… eso es todo.

Mary había soltado la labor que tenía en las manos y levantó los ojos. Hay con frecuencia algo maternal incluso en el amor de una adolescente, y las difíciles experiencias de Mary habían dado a su carácter una impresionabilidad muy distinta de esa cosa dura y superficial que llamamos feminidad adolescente. Las últimas palabras de Fred le produjeron un dolor muy agudo, algo parecido a lo que siente una madre al imaginarse los sollozos o los gritos de su hijo, desobediente y holgazán, que puede perderse y lastimarse. Y cuando, al alzar la mirada, sus ojos se tropezaron con la mirada opaca y llena de desesperación de Fred, su compasión pudo más que su enfado y todas sus otras preocupaciones.

—¡Qué mal aspecto tienes! Siéntate un momento. No te vayas todavía. Déjame decirle al tío que estás aquí. Le ha extrañado que no te dejaras ver durante toda una semana. —Mary hablaba con precipitación, diciendo las primeras palabras que se le ocurrían sin saber muy bien cuáles eran, pero pronunciándolas en un tono consolador y suplicante a medias, al mismo tiempo que se ponía en pie para ir en busca del señor Featherstone. Fred, por supuesto, tuvo la sensación de que se habían despejado las nubes y le iluminaba un rayo de sol; en seguida le cortó el paso.

—Di una sola palabra, Mary, y haré cualquier cosa. Di que no pensarás tan mal de mí… que no me darás completamente por perdido.

—Como si pensar mal de ti me proporcionara algún placer —dijo Mary con tono apesadumbrado—. Como si no fuera doloroso verte convertido en un ser frívolo y holgazán. ¿Cómo soportas ser tan despreciable, cuando otros trabajan y se esfuerzan y hay tantas cosas que hacer? ¿Cómo soportas no servir para nada en un mundo donde hay tantas personas útiles? Porque con todas las cosas buenas que hay en tu manera de ser podrías llegar a valer mucho.

—Trataré de ser lo que tú desees, Mary, si dices que me quieres.

—Me avergonzaría decir que quiero a un hombre que tiene que estar siempre dependiendo de otros y calculando lo que van a hacer por él. ¿Qué será de ti cuando tengas cuarenta años? Otro señor Bowyer, supongo, tan holgazán como él, viviendo en el salón de la señora Beck… gordo y desastrado, con la esperanza de que alguien te invite a cenar… empleando la mañana en aprender una canción cómica… ¡no, perdón!, en aprender a tocar una melodía con la flauta.

Los labios de Mary habían empezado a curvarse con una sonrisa tan pronto como hizo la pregunta sobre

el futuro de Fred (las almas jóvenes son cambiantes) y antes de que terminara de hablar todo su rostro estaba iluminado por el buen humor. Que Mary pudiera reírse de él era para el joven Vincy como la desaparición de un dolor, y con una sonrisa como de resignación trató de cogerle una mano; pero ella se escabulló rápidamente hacia la puerta y dijo:

—Voy a decírselo al tío. Tienes que verlo aunque solo sea un momento.

Fred estaba convencido en su interior de que era imposible que se cumplieran las sarcásticas profecías de Mary sobre su futuro, aparte de su disponibilidad para hacer cualquier cosa concreta que ella le pidiera. Delante de Mary nunca se atrevía a hablar de sus esperanzas sobre la herencia del señor Featherstone y ella las omitía siempre, como si todo dependiera únicamente de Fred. Pero si alguna vez las tierras llegaban a ser suyas, Mary tendría que reconocer que su posición había cambiado. Todo aquello pasó por su imaginación de manera un tanto lánguida antes de subir a ver a su tío. Se quedó con él muy poco tiempo, con la excusa de que estaba resfriado; y Mary no volvió a aparecer mientras estuvo en la casa. Pero mientras regresaba a caballo hacia Middlemarch empezó a percatarse de que estaba más indispuesto que melancólico.

Cuando Caleb Garth llegó a Stone Court poco después del crepúsculo, Mary no se sorprendió, aunque su padre tenía muy pocas veces el tiempo necesario para hacerle una visita y no le gustaba nada hablar con el señor Featherstone. El anciano, por su parte, se sentía incómodo con un cuñado al que no podía molestar, a quien no importaba que lo considerasen pobre, que nunca le pedía nada y que entendía todos los tipos de cultivo y de explotaciones mineras mejor que él. Mary estaba segura de que sus padres querrían verla y, si Caleb no hubiese acudido a Stone Court, habría pedido permiso para ir a su casa una o dos horas al día siguiente. Después de conversar sobre precios con el señor Featherstone durante el té, Caleb se levantó para despedirse y dijo:

—Quiero hablar contigo, Mary.

La muchacha, cogiendo una vela, lo acompañó a otra espaciosa sala donde no estaba encendido el fuego y, colocando la débil luz sobre la oscura mesa de caoba, se volvió hacia su padre y echándole los brazos al cuello lo besó con los besos infantiles que a él tanto le gustaban y que dulcificaban la expresión de sus grandes cejas como se dulcifica la expresión de un hermoso perro de gran tamaño cuando se le acaricia. Mary era su preferida y, dijera Susan lo que quisiese y a pesar de que tuviera razón en todo lo demás, a Caleb le parecía natural que Fred o cualquier muchacho la considerase más adorable que todas las otras chicas.

—Tengo algo que decirte, querida mía —dijo el señor Garth con su habitual aire indeciso—. No son muy buenas noticias; pero también es cierto que podrían ser peores.

—¿Se trata de dinero, padre? Creo que ya sé lo que es.

—¿Cómo es posible? Verás, me he portado una vez más como un estúpido y después de haber avalado un pagaré me encuentro con que tengo que poner yo el dinero; lo peor es que tu madre se va a quedar sin sus ahorros y ni siquiera con eso reunimos la suma que hace falta. Necesitamos ciento diez libras: tu madre tiene noventa y dos, yo no dispongo de nada en el banco y ella piensa que tú debes de tener algo ahorrado.

—Sí, claro; más de veinticuatro libras. Me imaginaba que vendría, padre, así que lo metí en el bolso. ¿Ve? Billetes de banco recién estrenados y monedas de oro.

Mary sacó el dinero del monedero y se lo puso a su padre en la mano.

—Bien, pero cómo… Solo nos hacen falta dieciocho… Toma, guárdate el resto, hija… pero ¿cómo lo has sabido? —dijo Caleb, que, dada su suprema indiferencia ante el dinero, empezaba a preocuparse sobre todo por la relación que aquel asunto pudiera tener con los sentimientos de Mary.

—Fred me lo ha contado esta mañana.

—¡Ah! ¿Ha venido expresamente para eso?

—Sí, creo que sí. Estaba muy afligido.

—Mucho me temo que no sea posible fiarse de él, Mary —dijo el señor Garth, con una mezcla de ternura y timidez—. Quizá sus propósitos sean mejores que sus actos, pero me parecería una lástima que la felicidad de alguien dependiera de él y lo mismo le sucedería a tu madre.

—Y a mí también, padre —dijo Mary, sin alzar la vista, pero acercándose a la mejilla la mano de su padre.

—No es mi intención entrometerme, querida. Pero tenía miedo de que hubiera algo entre Fred y tú, y quería prevenirte. Date cuenta de que una mujer —aquí la voz de Caleb se hizo aún más tierna; había estado dando vueltas al sombrero abandonado encima de la mesa y mirándolo, pero por fin volvió los ojos hacia su hija—, por muy buena que sea, tiene que aceptar la vida que su marido le ofrece. Tu madre ha tenido que soportar muchas cosas por culpa mía.

Mary se llevó a los labios la mano de su padre y le sonrió.

—Bien, bien, nadie es perfecto, pero —aquí el señor Garth agitó la cabeza para suplir de alguna forma la insuficiencia de las palabras— estoy pensando en lo que debe de ser para una esposa no estar nunca segura de un marido a quien le preocupa menos perjudicar a otros que pillarse los dedos. Ese es el meollo del asunto, Mary. Los jóvenes se encariñan antes de saber lo que es la vida y creen que todo es una fiesta con tal de estar juntos; en seguida llegan los días de entre semana, querida. Sin embargo, tú tienes más sentido común que la mayoría y no te has criado entre algodones; puede que no esté justificado que yo diga esto, pero un padre tiembla por su hija y aquí estás completamente sola.

—No tenga miedo por mí, padre —dijo Mary, buscando con mucha seriedad los ojos de Caleb—. Fred siempre se ha portado muy bien conmigo; tiene buen corazón, es afectuoso y nada falso, creo yo, a pesar de ser tan poco disciplinado. Pero nunca me prometeré con alguien que no tenga la independencia de una persona responsable y deje pasar el tiempo holgazaneando con la esperanza de que otros le solucionen la vida. Mi madre y usted me han enseñado a tener demasiado orgullo para hacer una cosa así.

—Eso está bien… muy bien. En ese caso me quedo tranquilo —dijo el señor Garth, recogiendo el sombrero—. Pero se me hace muy duro marcharme de aquí con tus ahorros, hija.

—¡Padre! —dijo Mary, con su más profundo acento de reproche—. Llévese también los bolsillos llenos de cariño para todos los de casa —fueron sus últimas palabras antes de que el señor Garth se marchara.

—Imagino que tu padre venía en busca de tus ahorros —dijo el anciano señor Featherstone con su habitual capacidad para intuir sucesos desagradables, cuando Mary regresó junto a él—. Imagino que anda siempre a la cuarta pregunta. Ya eres mayor de edad; deberías ahorrar para ti.

—Considero a mi padre y a mi madre como la mejor parte de mí misma, tío —le respondió la muchacha con frialdad.

El señor Featherstone dejó escapar un gruñido: no podía negar la lógica de que se contara con que una chica tan corriente como Mary sirviera para algo, de manera que pensó en otra réplica, lo bastante molesta para que siempre resultara oportuna:

—Si Fred Vincy viene mañana, no te quedes charlando con él, déjale que suba a verme.

Capítulo XXVI

> Me pega y yo me burlo de él: ¡Vaya una satisfacción! Ojalá fuese al revés: que yo le pegara mientras él se burlaba de mí.
>
> *Troilo y Crésida*

Pero Fred no fue a Stone Court al día siguiente, por razones extremadamente graves. De sus visitas a las insalubres calles de Houndsley en busca de Diamond, el joven Vincy había regresado no solo con una pésima compra de carne de caballo, sino con la desgracia añadida de un padecimiento que por espacio de un día o dos había dado la impresión de ser simple depresión y dolor de cabeza, pero que empeoró tanto a su regreso de Stone Court que, al entrar en el comedor, tuvo que echarse en el sofá y, en respuesta a la pregunta de su madre, llena de ansiedad, decir:

—Me siento muy enfermo; creo que deberías llamar a Wrench.

Wrench apareció, pero no llegó a descubrir nada serio; habló de un «leve trastorno» y no dijo nada de volver al día siguiente. Wrench valoraba como es debido la casa de los Vincy, pero los hombres más cuidadosos pueden distraerse un poco por culpa de la rutina y realizar sus tareas en una mañana gris con el celo de quien toca la campana todos los días. El señor Wrench era un hombre pequeño, pulcro, de mal color y con una peluca muy bien cuidada; tenía una clientela que le daba mucho trabajo, un carácter irascible, una mujer linfática y siete hijos; e iba ya con bastante retraso antes de iniciar un trayecto de seis kilómetros para reunirse con el doctor Minchin al otro lado de Tipton, porque la muerte de Hicks, un médico rural, había aumentado su clientela en aquella dirección. Si los grandes hombres de Estado se equivocan, ¿por qué no habrían de hacerlo profesionales de la medicina de poca importancia? El señor Wrench no se olvidó de enviar los habituales paquetitos blancos que contenían purgantes de color negro, pero no aliviaron al pobre Fred. Este, sin embargo, poco dispuesto, como él decía, a creer que «estaba enfermo de verdad», se levantó a su hora habitual, bastante descansado, y bajó al comedor con intención de desayunar, sin lograr otra cosa que sentarse junto al fuego y tiritar. Se solicitó de nuevo la presencia del señor Wrench, pero había salido a hacer sus visitas y la señora Vincy, al ver el mal aspecto y los dolores generalizados de su hijo muy querido, se echó a llorar y dijo que mandaría a buscar al doctor Sprague.

—¡Qué tontería, madre! No es nada —dijo Fred, tendiéndole una mano seca y ardiente—; muy pronto estaré completamente bien. Debo de haber cogido frío durante aquel desagradable viaje a un sitio tan húmedo.

—¡Mamá! —dijo Rosamond, que se hallaba sentada cerca de la ventana (las ventanas del comedor daban a una calle muy respetable, llamada Lowick Gate)—, ahí está el señor Lydgate, que se ha parado a hablar con alguien. Si yo fuera tú, lo llamaría. Ha curado a Ellen Bulstrode. Dicen que cura a todo el mundo.

La señora Vincy corrió hacia la ventana y la abrió inmediatamente, pensando solo en Fred y olvidada de la etiqueta médica. Lydgate, a dos metros de distancia, del otro lado de una verja de hierro, se dio la vuelta al oír el ruido repentino del bastidor de la ventana, antes de que la madre de Fred lo llamara. Dos minutos más tarde estaba en la habitación, de la que Rosamond se ausentó después de esperar tan solo lo suficiente para mostrar su preocupación fraterna sin renunciar por ello a su sentido de lo que era apropiado en aquel momento.

Lydgate tuvo que escuchar un relato en el que la señora Vincy insistía con notable instinto en todos los

puntos de escasa importancia, especialmente en lo que el señor Wrench había dicho o dejado de decir sobre una segunda visita al enfermo. Lydgate advirtió de inmediato que podían surgir dificultades con Wrench; pero el caso era lo bastante serio para prescindir de aquella consideración: estaba convencido de que Fred se hallaba en el estadio de la fiebre tifoidea caracterizado por el color sonrosado de la piel y que las medicinas que había tomado eran contraproducentes. Tenía que guardar cama de inmediato, necesitaba una enfermera y debían hacérsele diferentes aplicaciones y tomarse precauciones concretas sobre las que Lydgate se mostraba muy exigente. El terror de la pobre señora Vincy ante aquellas señales de peligro encontró desahogo en las primeras palabras que se le ocurrieron. Se consideró «maltratada por el señor Wrench, que durante tantos años había atendido a su familia, dado que lo habían preferido al señor Peacock, aunque el señor Peacock fuese igualmente amigo suyo. Por qué el señor Wrench tendría que descuidar a sus hijos era algo que no le cabía en la cabeza por mucho que se esforzara. No había descuidado a los de la señora Larcher cuando tuvieron el sarampión, ni tampoco, por supuesto, habría querido la señora Vincy que lo hiciese. Y si sucediera algo…».

Al llegar aquí la presencia de ánimo de la señora Vincy se desmoronó y su garganta, semejante a la de Níobe, y sus facciones, habitualmente alegres, se vieron tristemente crispadas por el dolor. Aquello sucedía en el pasillo, donde Fred no podía oírlos, pero Rosamond había abierto la puerta de la sala y se acercó a ellos con expresión inquieta. Lydgate disculpó al señor Wrench, dijo que los síntomas del día anterior podían haber sido engañosos y que aquella variedad de fiebre se prestaba a confusión en sus comienzos: él en persona iría inmediatamente al farmacéutico y haría que se prepararan unas medicinas para no perder tiempo, pero escribiría al señor Wrench y le explicaría lo que había hecho.

—Pero tiene usted que volver… Tiene usted que seguir atendiendo a Fred. No consentiré que a mi hijo lo trate una persona que puede venir o dejar de venir. No le guardo rencor a nadie, gracias a Dios, y Wrench me salvó cuando tuve la pleuresía, pero más valdría que me hubiese dejado morir… si… si…

—Entonces, me reuniré aquí con el señor Wrench, ¿no es eso? —dijo Lydgate, sinceramente convencido de que Wrench no estaba preparado para actuar juiciosamente en un caso como aquel.

—Encárguese usted de arreglarlo, háganos ese favor, señor Lydgate —dijo Rosamond, viniendo en ayuda de su madre y cogiéndola del brazo para llevársela.

Cuando el señor Vincy regresó a su despacho se enfadó mucho con Wrench, y afirmó que no le importaría no volver a verlo en su casa. Lydgate debía seguir con el enfermo, tanto si a Wrench le gustaba como si no. No era ninguna broma tener un caso de fiebre. Había que avisar en seguida a todo el mundo para que no viniesen a cenar el jueves. Y que Pritchard no subiera más vino de la bodega: el brandy era el mejor remedio contra las infecciones.

—Beberé brandy —añadió el señor Vincy, con gran énfasis en sus palabras, como diciendo que no era aquella una ocasión para disparar con cartuchos de fogueo—. A ese chico le sale todo mal, no cabe duda. Espero que alguna vez le sonría la suerte para compensar todo esto. De lo contrario no se quién va a querer un hijo primogénito.

—No digas eso, Vincy —exclamó la madre del enfermo con labios temblorosos—, si no quieres que Dios se lo lleve de mi lado.

—Te morirías del disgusto, Lucy; eso ya lo veo —dijo el señor Vincy con mayor suavidad—. Pero Wrench sabrá lo que pienso de este asunto. —El señor Vincy opinaba de manera bastante vaga que, si Wrench hubiese mostrado la debida solicitud por su familia, la del alcalde, la fiebre podría haberse evitado —. Soy la última persona en clamar por los nuevos médicos o los nuevos párrocos… tanto si son hombres de Bulstrode como si no. Pero Wrench sabrá lo que pienso y que se lo tome como quiera.

Wrench no se lo tomó nada bien. Lydgate fue todo lo cortés que podía ser con sus modales distantes, pero la cortesía de un hombre que nos ha colocado en situación tan desairada supone tan solo un insulto añadido a la ofensa, sobre todo si ya era de antemano objeto de animadversión. Los médicos rurales solían ser una especie malhumorada, muy susceptible en puntos de honor; y el señor Wrench era uno de los más irritables. No se negó a celebrar consulta con Lydgate a última hora de la tarde, pero su paciencia estuvo a punto de agotarse. Tuvo que oír decir a la señora Vincy:

—¡Ay, señor Wrench! ¿Qué habré hecho yo para que me trate usted así? ¡Irse y no volver! ¡Cuando mi pobre hijo podría haber terminado en un ataúd!

El señor Vincy, que había mantenido un fuego graneado contra el enemigo Infección y se hallaba en consecuencia muy a tono, se levantó al oír entrar a Wrench y salió al vestíbulo para hacerle saber lo que pensaba.

—Déjeme decirle una cosa, Wrench, esto no se puede tomar a broma —comenzó el alcalde, que en los últimos tiempos había tenido que reprender a los transgresores adoptando un aire oficial y que ahora daba

más empaque a su apariencia metiendo los pulgares en las sisas del chaleco—. Dejar que la fiebre pille desprevenida a una familia como esta. Hay algunas cosas que deberían ser procesables y que no lo son: eso es lo que yo opino.

Pero los reproches irracionales eran más fáciles de soportar que la sensación de ser adoctrinado o más bien la sensación de que un hombre más joven, como Lydgate, lo considerase tácitamente necesitado de instrucción, porque «a decir verdad», como explicó después, Lydgate hizo alarde de frívolas ideas extranjeras sin consistencia alguna. Wrench reprimió su indignación por el momento, pero después escribió renunciando a seguir ocupándose del enfermo. Es posible que se tratara de unos buenos clientes, pero él no iba a someterse servilmente a nadie en una cuestión profesional. Se hizo la reflexión —reflexión con grandes probabilidades de no andar descaminada— de que con el tiempo también Lydgate daría algún tropezón y de que sus intentos nada caballerosos de desacreditar a sus colegas por vender medicamentos terminarían volviéndose contra él. Wrench fue dejando caer cáusticos comentarios sobre las triquiñuelas de Lydgate —dignas tan solo de un charlatán— para crearse una falsa reputación entre personas crédulas. Toda aquella jerga suya tan peculiar sobre métodos curativos no sería jamás aceptada por profesionales competentes.

Era aquel un punto en el que Lydgate se sentía todo lo molesto que Wrench pudiera desear. Verse ensalzado por la ignorancia no era solo humillante, sino peligroso y tan poco envidiable como la reputación de quien profetiza el tiempo que hará. Le irritaban las absurdas esperanzas que rodean el desarrollo de cualquier tarea médica y las posibilidades que tenía de perjudicarse haciendo gala de una franqueza reñida con la ética profesional.

Fuera como fuese, lo cierto es que Lydgate se convirtió en el médico de cabecera de los Vincy y que aquel acontecimiento dio mucho que hablar en Middlemarch. Algunos decían que los Vincy se habían comportado escandalosamente: el señor Vincy había amenazado a Wrench y su mujer lo acusaba de haber envenenado a su hijo. Otros mantenían que la aparición de Lydgate había sido providencial, que era un verdadero experto en fiebres y que Bulstrode hacía bien al darle su apoyo. Muchas personas creían que la llegada misma de Lydgate a la ciudad era en realidad obra de Bulstrode; y la señora Taft, que estaba siempre contando puntos de media y que reunía su información a partir de engañosos fragmentos atrapados entre las vueltas de su labor, llegó a convencerse de que el señor Lydgate era hijo natural de Bulstrode, hecho que parecía justificar la desconfianza que le inspiraban los seglares de convicciones evangélicas.

Un día la señora Taft transmitió esta información a la señora Farebrother, que no dudó en pasársela a su hijo.

—No me sorprendería nada de lo que pueda haber hecho Bulstrode, pero sentiría tener que pensar una cosa así del señor Lydgate —fue su comentario.

—Vamos, madre —dijo el señor Farebrother, después de reír a carcajadas—, sabes muy bien que Lydgate procede de una excelente familia del norte. Nunca había oído hablar de Bulstrode hasta que llegó aquí.

—Eso está muy bien por lo que se refiere al señor Lydgate, Camden —dijo la anciana señora con aire de estar poniendo los puntos sobre las íes—. Pero en cuanto a Bulstrode… la noticia puede ser cierta con respecto a algún otro hijo.

Capítulo XXVII

Que la musa excelsa cante los amores del Olimpo;
nosotros solo mortales somos y hemos de cantar al hombre.

Unos de mis amigos, filósofo eminente, que puede dar dignidad incluso a unos muebles feos elevándolos mediante la serena luz de la ciencia, me ha mostrado un hecho insignificante pero preñado de consecuencias. Un espejo de cuerpo entero o una amplia superficie de acero bruñido que una doncella se encargue de frotar, recibirá diminutos y múltiples arañazos en todas direcciones; pero si después se coloca frente a esos objetos una vela encendida como centro de iluminación, los arañazos parecerán distribuirse en una delicada serie de círculos concéntricos en torno a ese pequeño sol. Se puede demostrar que los arañazos van en todas direcciones de manera imparcial y que solo nuestra vela crea la lisonjera ilusión de una ordenación concéntrica, ya que su luz produce una selección exclusivamente óptica. Todo esto no es más que una parábola. Los rasguños son acontecimientos y la vela el egoísmo de cualquier persona que está ahora ausente: el de la señorita Vincy, por ejemplo. Rosamond disfrutaba de una providencia propia que había tenido la amabilidad de hacerla más encantadora que otras muchachas y que parecía haber dispuesto la enfermedad de Fred y el error del señor Wrench para crear lazos de proximidad entre Lydgate y ella. Que Rosamond hubiera consentido en marcharse a Stone Court o a algún otro sitio, como sus padres deseaban, habría significado contravenir aquellas disposiciones, sobre todo si se tiene en cuenta que el señor Lydgate consideraba innecesaria tal precaución. Por tanto, mientras se enviaba a la señorita Morgan y a los hijos más pequeños a una granja a la mañana siguiente de declararse la enfermedad de Fred, Rosamond se negó a abandonar a sus padres.

La pobre mamá se hallaba desde luego en un estado capaz de conmover a cualquier criatura nacida de mujer; y el señor Vincy, que sentía verdadera devoción por su esposa, estaba más preocupado por su estado que por el de Fred. De no haber sido por lo mucho que él insistía, la señora Vincy no habría descansado nunca: su animación estaba totalmente oscurecida; sin darse cuenta siquiera de la ropa que llevaba puesta —ella que siempre había sido tan alegre y cuidadosa en el vestir—, parecía un pájaro enfermo de mirada lánguida y plumaje descompuesto, con los sentidos embotados para todas las imágenes y sonidos que solían interesarle más. El delirio de Fred, durante el cual su hijo parecía vagabundear fuera de su alcance, le destrozaba el corazón. Después de su primera explosión contra el señor Wrench, iba de un lado para otro en completo silencio: sus únicos lamentos contenidos eran para Lydgate. Lo seguía al salir del cuarto del enfermo y le ponía una mano en el brazo, diciendo entre gemidos: «Salve a mi hijo». En una ocasión argumentó: «Siempre ha sido bueno conmigo, señor Lydgate: nunca ha tenido una palabra dura para su madre», como si los sufrimientos del pobre Fred fuesen un castigo por sus pecados. Las fibras más profundas de su memoria maternal habían entrado en vibración y el hombre joven cuya voz se hacía más dulce al hablarle se identificaba por completo con el niño al que ya antes de nacer había amado con un amor hasta entonces desconocido.

—Tengo muchas esperanzas, señora Vincy —decía Lydgate—. Baje conmigo para que hablemos de la comida.

De esa manera la conducía hasta la sala donde se encontraba Rosamond, haciéndole cambiar de escenario y consiguiendo por sorpresa que tomara un poco de té o un caldo preparado para ella. Existía un constante entendimiento entre Lydgate y Rosamond en esas cuestiones. El médico la veía casi siempre antes de ir a la habitación del enfermo y Rosamond recurría a él para saber lo que podía hacer por su mamá. Su

presencia de ánimo y su destreza para cumplir las indicaciones del médico eran admirables, y no tiene nada de extraordinario que la idea de ver a Rosamond comenzara a mezclarse con el interés que Lydgate sentía por el caso. Sobre todo cuando Fred superó la etapa crítica y el médico empezó a tener confianza en su recuperación. En el momento de mayor duda había aconsejado que se llamara al doctor Sprague (quien, de haber estado en su mano, habría deseado más bien permanecer neutral por causa de Wrench); pero, después de dos consultas, la dirección del caso quedó por completo en manos de Lydgate y existían razones abundantes para justificar su asiduidad. Por las mañanas y a última hora de la tarde el médico aparecía por casa del señor Vincy y poco a poco las visitas se hicieron más alegres a medida que Fred empezó a estar simplemente débil y yacía no solo necesitado de todos los mimos posibles, sino consciente de ellos, de manera que la señora Vincy tuvo la impresión de que, después de todo, aquella enfermedad de su hijo le había proporcionado una oportunidad excepcional para dar rienda suelta a su ternura.

Tanto el padre como la madre del enfermo consideraron razón añadida para el optimismo que el anciano señor Featherstone enviara mensajes a través de Lydgate, diciendo que Fred debía ponerse bien muy pronto, porque él, Peter Featherstone, no podía pasarse sin su sobrino y echaba de menos sus visitas. El anciano, por su parte, se veía obligado a pasar casi todo el tiempo en la cama. La señora Vincy transmitía a Fred aquellos mensajes cuando estaba en condiciones de escucharla, y su hijo volvía hacia ella un rostro demacrado, al que faltaba el adorno de sus tupidos cabellos rubios, cortados por orden del médico, y en el que los ojos parecían haber aumentado de tamaño, esperando anhelante noticias de Mary… y preguntándose cuáles serían los sentimientos de la muchacha sobre su enfermedad. Ni una sola palabra salía de sus labios; pero «oír con los ojos es uno de los excepcionales dones del amor»[69] y la madre, con el corazón rebosante de cariño, no solo adivinaba los deseos de Fred, sino que se sentía dispuesta a cualquier sacrificio por satisfacerlos.

—Si llego a ver de nuevo a mi hijo lleno de salud —decía la señora Vincy en su locura maternal— y, ¿quién sabe?, quizá dueño de Stone Court, estará en condiciones de casarse con quien le apetezca.

—Solo si me quieren aceptar, madre —decía Fred. La enfermedad lo había infantilizado y los ojos se le llenaban de lágrimas al hablar.

—Toma un poco de mermelada, querido —respondía ella, convencida en su interior de la imposibilidad de tal negativa.

La señora Vincy nunca se apartaba de Fred cuando su marido no estaba en casa, por lo que Rosamond se encontraba en la situación poco frecuente de pasar largos ratos sola. A Lydgate, como es lógico, nunca se le ocurrió quedarse mucho tiempo con ella y, sin embargo, daba la impresión de que las breves conversaciones impersonales que sostenían estaban creando esa peculiar intimidad que consiste en mostrarse tímido. Se veían obligados a mirarse al hablar y por alguna razón resultaba imposible prolongar aquellas miradas sin darles una importancia que en realidad no tenían. Lydgate empezó a sentir que le desagradaba aquella situación y un día miró hacia abajo o hacia cualquier otro sitio, como una marioneta mal manejada. Pero el resultado fue negativo: al día siguiente Rosamond miró hacia el suelo y, cuando sus ojos se encontraron de nuevo, los dos se mostraron más cohibidos que antes. La ciencia no podía ayudarle en aquel caso y, como Lydgate no quería flirtear, tampoco parecía que la frivolidad pudiera servirle de nada. La tensión disminuyó cuando los vecinos dejaron de considerar que la casa de los Vincy estaba en cuarentena y las oportunidades de ver a Rosamond a solas mermaron en gran medida.

Pero, una vez que ha existido, la intimidad que proporciona la mutua turbación, en la que cada uno nota que el otro está sintiendo algo, tiene unos efectos que no es posible eliminar. Hablar del tiempo y de otros temas de buena educación parece en seguida una vana estratagema, y el comportamiento difícilmente llega a ser natural a no ser que se reconozca con franqueza la existencia de una mutua fascinación… que, por supuesto, no tiene por qué significar nada profundo o serio. Esa fue la manera en que Rosamond y Lydgate regresaron poco a poco a la naturalidad, consiguiendo que sus conversaciones se animaran de nuevo. Los visitantes iban y venían como de costumbre, se interpretaba otra vez música en el salón y reapareció toda la hospitalidad ligada a la condición de alcalde del señor Vincy. Lydgate, siempre que le era posible, se sentaba al lado de Rosamond, se quedaba más tiempo para oírla tocar y cantar y se llamaba a sí mismo su cautivo… con la intención, de todas formas, de no llegar a serlo. La imposibilidad de que pudiera estar pronto en condiciones de establecerse de manera satisfactoria como hombre casado era garantía suficiente contra el peligro. Aquel jugar a estar un poco enamorado resultaba agradable y no suponía un obstáculo para ocupaciones más serias. Flirtear, después de todo, no era un proceso en el que fuera necesario terminar quemándose. Rosamond, por su parte, nunca había disfrutado tanto: estaba segura de haber despertado el interés de alguien a quien merecía la pena cautivar, y la señorita Vincy no distinguía entre coqueteo y amor, tanto si se trataba de ella como de cualquier otra persona. Tenía la impresión de navegar con viento

favorable en la dirección que deseaba, y sus pensamientos andaban muy ocupados con una hermosa casa en Lowick Gate que confiaba en que quedara libre con el tiempo. Estaba del todo decidida, una vez casada, a librarse con habilidad de todos los visitantes de su padre que no le agradaban; y se imaginaba el salón de la casa de sus sueños amueblada en diferentes estilos.

Es cierto que pensaba mucho en Lydgate; lo encontraba casi perfecto: si hubiera sabido algo más de música, para que su fascinación ante las interpretaciones de Rosamond se pareciera menos a la de un elefante impresionable, y si hubiera sido capaz de apreciar mejor los refinamientos de su gusto en el vestir, la señorita Vincy difícilmente podría haber señalado en él deficiencia alguna. ¡Qué distinto del joven Plymdale o del señor Caius Larcher! Los jóvenes de Middlemarch ni sabían una palabra de francés, ni eran capaces de hablar de ningún tema con llamativa precisión, excepto quizá de tintes y transportes, ocupaciones que, por supuesto, se avergonzaban de mencionar; eran personas acomodadas de Middlemarch, encantadas de sus fustas con empuñadura de plata y de sus corbatines de raso, pero se mostraban inseguras en sus modales y tímidamente festivas: incluso Fred se hallaba por encima de ellas, al poseer por lo menos el acento y los modales de un universitario. Lydgate, en cambio, siempre escuchado por todos, se comportaba con la descuidada cortesía de quien no ignora la propia superioridad, y parecía llevar la ropa adecuada por una especie de afinidad natural, sin necesidad de pensar en ello. Rosamond se sentía orgullosa cuando Lydgate entraba en la habitación y, al acercársele con una sonrisa llena de distinción, experimentaba la deliciosa sensación de ser objeto de una envidiable pleitesía. Si Lydgate se hubiera percatado de todo el orgullo que despertaba en aquel delicado pecho, quizá se habría sentido tan halagado como cualquier otro hombre, incluso el más ignorante de la patología de los humores o del tejido fibroso; el joven médico consideraba una de las más agradables cualidades de la mente femenina venerar la superioridad de un hombre sin tener un conocimiento demasiado preciso de en qué consistía.

Pero Rosamond no era una de esas muchachas indefensas que descubren sus sentimientos sin darse cuenta y cuyo comportamiento mueven con torpeza sus impulsos, en lugar de ser orientado por una cautelosa elegancia y corrección. ¿Se imagina alguien que sus rápidos proyectos y reflexiones sobre muebles y posibles invitados salieran alguna vez a la luz en su conversación, incluso cuando hablaba con su mamá? Por el contrario, habría manifestado la más delicada sorpresa y desaprobación si hubiera sabido que otra joven dejaba traslucir tan inmodesta precipitación; es probable, incluso, que se hubiera negado a aceptar semejante posibilidad. Porque la señorita Vincy nunca manifestaba estar al tanto de nada impropio y era precisamente esa combinación de sentimientos decorosos, de música, de baile, de dibujo, de elegante redacción en la correspondencia, de álbum privado para citas poéticas y de perfecta belleza rubia, lo que definía a la mujer irresistible para el hombre marcado por el sino en aquella época. Que nadie le atribuya una maldad inexistente, por favor: Rosamond no urdía perversas intrigas, no había en ella nada sórdido ni venal; de hecho, nunca pensaba en el dinero más que como en algo necesario que otras personas estarían siempre dispuestas a proporcionarle. No tenía por costumbre decir mentiras, y si sus manifestaciones no llevaban directamente a los hechos, se debía a que tampoco era esa la misión que se les encomendaba: se limitaban a ser uno más de sus elegantes talentos, destinados a agradar. La naturaleza había recurrido a muchas artes en el acabado de la alumna favorita de la señora Lemon, quien según todas las opiniones (exceptuada la de Fred) era una combinación singular de belleza, inteligencia y buen carácter.

Lydgate descubrió que cada vez le agradaba más estar con ella; ya habían desaparecido las actitudes forzadas, mantenían un delicioso intercambio de energía anímica a través de los ojos y lo que decían tenía para ellos esa superabundancia de significado que al ser observada por una tercera persona produce cierta sensación de monotonía; pero continuaban sin tener entrevistas o apartes de los que fuera necesario excluir a terceras personas. En realidad flirteaban; y Lydgate estaba seguro de que no hacían nada más. Si un hombre no podía amar y ser prudente, sí cabía la posibilidad de que flirteara y fuese prudente al mismo tiempo. A decir verdad, los hombres de Middlemarch, con la excepción del señor Farebrother, eran personas tremendamente aburridas y a Lydgate no le interesaban ni la política comercial ni los naipes: ¿qué podía hacer para distraerse? Los Bulstrode le invitaban con frecuencia a su casa; pero las muchachas que había allí acababan apenas de salir del colegio; y la ingenua forma en que la señora Bulstrode reconciliaba devoción con intereses mundanos, la nada de la vida terrena con la conveniencia del cristal tallado, la conciencia simultánea de los sucios andrajos y del mejor damasco, no bastaba para compensar el peso de la invariable seriedad de su marido. La casa de los Vincy, con todas sus faltas, resultaba, por contraste, mucho más atractiva; además, albergaba a Rosamond: tan grata de ver como un capullo de rosa abierto a medias y adornada por las cualidades necesarias para el refinado entretenimiento del varón.

Pero Lydgate se hizo algunos enemigos, ajenos a la medicina, por su éxito con la señorita Vincy. Un día llegó al salón más bien tarde, cuando ya estaban allí otros visitantes. La mesa para jugar a las cartas había

alejado a todas las personas de más edad y el señor Ned Plymdale (uno de los buenos partidos de Middlemarch, aunque no fuera la suya una de las cabezas más brillantes) se hallaba en un *tête-à-tête* con Rosamond. Había traído consigo el último *Keepsake*[70], la brillante publicación con efecto de muaré que señalaba el progreso moderno en aquella época, y el señor Plymdale se consideraba muy afortunado por ser el primero que lo hojeaba con Rosamond, deteniéndose en las damas y en los caballeros con resplandecientes mejillas grabadas en cobre y sonrisas igualmente resplandecientes, calificando de importantes los versos cómicos y resaltando el interés de las historias sentimentales. Rosamond se mostraba amable y Ned se sentía satisfecho por poseer lo mejor en el arte y en la literatura como medio para cortejar… y lo más indicado para agradar a una joven refinada. También tenía razones, profundas más que ostensibles, para estar satisfecho con su propia apariencia. Un observador superficial quizá pensara que su barbilla tenía un aspecto demasiado huidizo y que daba la impresión de estar reabsorbiéndose gradualmente, lo que causaba en el señor Plymdale ciertas dificultades a la hora de lograr que le sentaran bien los corbatines de raso, para lo cual las barbillas eran muy útiles en aquella época.

—Creo que su excelencia, la señora S., se parece un poco a usted —dijo Ned. Tenía el libro abierto por el fascinante retrato y lo contemplaba con aire más bien lánguido.

—Es muy ancha por detrás; quizá por eso posó sentada —dijo Rosamond, sin la menor intención satírica, pensando tan solo en lo rojas que tenía las manos el joven Plymdale y preguntándose por qué no llegaba Lydgate. Y sin dejar ni por un momento de trabajar en su labor de ganchillo.

—Yo no he dicho que fuera tan hermosa como usted —respondió Ned, aventurándose a levantar la vista desde el retrato hasta la señorita Vincy.

—Tengo la sospecha de que es usted un hábil adulador —dijo Rosamond, convencida de que tendría que darle calabazas por segunda vez.

Pero en aquel momento apareció Lydgate; el libro se cerró antes de que llegara al rincón de Rosamond y, cuando con toda naturalidad tomó asiento al otro lado de la señorita Vincy, la mandíbula del joven Plymdale cayó como un barómetro hacia el melancólico lado del tiempo cambiante. A Rosamond le alegró no solo la presencia de Lydgate, sino también su efecto: le gustaba despertar celos.

—¡Qué tarde llega! —dijo, mientras se estrechaban la mano—. Mamá le dio ya por perdido hace un rato. ¿Qué tal encuentra usted a Fred?

—Como de costumbre; mejora, pero despacio. Quiero que se vaya de aquí… a Stone Court, por ejemplo. Pero su mamá parece tener alguna objeción.

—¡Pobrecito! —dijo Rosamond con mucho encanto—. Encontrará usted muy cambiado a Fred —añadió, volviéndose hacia el otro pretendiente—; el señor Lydgate ha sido algo así como nuestro ángel de la guarda durante su enfermedad.

Ned sonrió con nerviosismo, mientras Lydgate, apoderándose del *Keepsake* y abriéndolo, dejaba escapar una breve risa desdeñosa y alzaba la barbilla, como asombrado ante la estupidez humana.

—¿De qué se ríe usted de esa manera tan irreverente? —dijo Rosamond, con imperturbable neutralidad.

—Me gustaría saber qué es lo que resulta más tonto aquí: si los grabados o el texto —dijo Lydgate, con su tono más convencido, mientras pasaba deprisa las páginas y daba la impresión de ver todo el libro en un momento, mostrando en el proceso sus grandes manos blancas de manera muy favorecedora, en opinión de Rosamond—. Fíjese en este novio saliendo de la iglesia: ¿ha visto alguna vez una «invención tan acaramelada», como solían decir los isabelinos? ¿Es que ha habido alguna vez un dependiente de comercio que sonriera con tanta afectación? Y sin embargo estoy seguro de que, según el texto, se trata de uno de los caballeros más importantes del país.

—Es usted tan severo que me asusta —dijo Rosamond, ocultando debidamente su regocijo. El pobre Plymdale se había demorado admirativamente ante el mismo grabado y aquello le obligó a intervenir.

—En cualquier caso, hay muchas personas célebres que escriben en el *Keepsake* —dijo, con tono irritado y al mismo tiempo tímido—. Es la primera vez que oigo a alguien llamarlo tonto.

—Creo que debo enfrentarme con usted y acusarle de bárbaro —dijo Rosamond, mirando a Lydgate con una sonrisa—. Supongo que no sabe usted nada de lady Blessington ni de L. E. L.[71] —la señorita Vincy disfrutaba con aquellas escritoras, pero no le gustaba comprometerse manifestando su admiración y estaba muy atenta a la más leve insinuación de que algo, según Lydgate, no fuera del gusto más refinado.

—Pero sir Walter Scott… supongo que el señor Lydgate lo conoce —dijo el joven Plymdale, un tanto animado ante aquel apoyo.

—Ahora no leo literatura —dijo Lydgate, cerrando el libro y dejándolo a un lado—. Leí tanta cuando era muchacho que imagino que me durará para el resto de mis días. Me sabía de memoria los poemas de Scott.

—Me gustaría saber cuándo dejó usted de leer a esos autores —dijo Rosamond—, porque entonces

podría estar segura de conocer algo que usted ignora.

—El señor Lydgate diría que eso no merece la pena —intervino Ned, deliberadamente cáustico.

—Por el contrario —dijo Lydgate, sin darse por aludido y sonriendo a Rosamond con exasperante confianza—. Merecería la pena conocerlo por el simple hecho de que fuera la señorita Vincy quien me lo contara.

El joven Plymdale se fue muy pronto a ver cómo jugaban al *whist*, pensando que Lydgate era una de las personas más presuntuosas y desagradables que había tenido la desgracia de conocer.

—¡Qué desconsiderado es usted! —dijo Rosamond, interiormente encantada—. ¿No se da cuenta de que lo ha ofendido?

—¡Cómo! ¿El libro es del señor Plymdale? Lo siento. No se me ocurrió.

—Tendré que empezar a admitir lo que dijo usted de sí mismo la primera vez que vino aquí: que es un oso y necesita aprender de los pájaros.

—Bueno, hay un ave que puede enseñarme lo que quiera. ¿No la escucho con la mejor voluntad?

A Rosamond le parecía, a todos los efectos, como si Lydgate y ella estuviesen prometidos. Que en algún momento llegarían a estarlo era una idea arraigada desde hacía tiempo en su cabeza; y las ideas, como todos sabemos, tienden a conseguir una existencia más sólida si encuentran a mano los materiales necesarios. Es cierto que Lydgate tenía la idea contraria de no comprometerse; pero se trataba de una simple negativa, de una sombra arrojada por otras resoluciones capaces de esfumarse. Resultaba casi seguro que las circunstancias terminarían respaldando la idea de Rosamond, que trabajaba activamente para conseguir sus propósitos y miraba a través de atentos ojos azules, mientras que la de Lydgate seguía ciega y despreocupada como una medusa que se licua sin darse cuenta.

Aquella noche, cuando llegó a su casa, el joven médico examinó sus tubos de laboratorio para ver cómo avanzaba un proceso de maceración y lo hizo con sereno interés; luego escribió unas notas en su diario con la misma precisión que de costumbre. Los ensueños a los que más difícil le resultaba renunciar eran construcciones ideales ajenas por completo a las virtudes de Rosamond, y el tejido primigenio seguía siendo aún la bella desconocida de su imaginación. Más aún, estaba empezando a encontrar cierto placer en la hostilidad creciente, aunque todavía oculta a medias, entre él y los otros profesionales de la medicina, hostilidad que, muy probablemente, aumentaría ahora que estaba a punto de hacerse público el sistema de Bulstrode para administrar el nuevo hospital; y había diferentes signos alentadores de que el rechazo de algunos antiguos pacientes de Peacock podría verse compensado por la buena impresión causada en otros sitios. Tan solo unos días después, cuando le aconteció adelantar a Rosamond en la carretera de Lowick y se apeó del caballo para caminar a su lado y acabar de protegerla convenientemente de un rebaño que pasaba, se vio detenido por un criado a caballo con un mensaje en el que una casa de cierta importancia a la que Peacock no había sido llamado nunca solicitaba sus servicios; se trataba ya del segundo caso de aquel tipo. El criado era de sir James Chettam y la casa, Lowick Manor.

Capítulo XXVIII

PRIMER CABALLERO: Todas las épocas son buenas para procurarse el hogar conyugal
que proporciona mutuo deleite.
SEGUNDO CABALLERO: Muy cierto.
El calendario no tendría un día malo
para las almas unidas por el amor, e incluso la muerte
sería dulce, si avanzara como las olas
mientras los esposos se abrazaban, sin prever
vivir separados.

El señor y la señora Casaubon, de regreso de su viaje de novios, llegaron a Lowick Manor a mediados de enero. Caía una suave nevada cuando se apearon frente a la casa y, a la mañana siguiente, al pasar Dorothea del vestidor al *boudoir* verde azulado que ya conocemos, vio cómo los tilos de la larga avenida alzaban sus troncos desde la tierra blanca y extendían sus ramas igualmente blancas contra un cielo gris e inmóvil. La lejana llanura quedaba reducida a una uniforme extensión blanca y a la monotonía de las nubes bajas. Hasta los muebles de la habitación parecían haber encogido desde la última vez que los vio: el ciervo del tapiz tenía aún más aspecto de aparición en su fantasmal mundo verde azulado; en la estantería, los volúmenes de literatura refinada daban más la impresión de ser inmutables imitaciones de libros. El alegre fuego de leña de roble que ardía sobre los morillos parecía una incongruente renovación de vida y calor… como la figura de la misma Dorothea cuando entró, llevando consigo los estuches de cuero rojo con los camafeos para Celia.

La señora Casaubon resplandecía gracias a su arreglo matutino como solo puede hacerlo la juventud saludable: había un brillo como de piedras preciosas en su cabello trenzado y en sus ojos de color avellana; había cálida vida roja en sus labios; su garganta tenía una blancura palpitante por encima de la diferente blancura de la piel de armiño que a su vez parecía curvarse alrededor de su cuello y descender sobre su capa gris azulada con una ternura surgida de su propia persona; una inocencia llena de vida que conservaba su encanto frente a la pureza cristalina de la nieve en el exterior. Al dejar los estuches de los camafeos sobre la mesa del mirador, no despegó inconscientemente las manos de ellos, absorta de inmediato en la contemplación del blanco e inmóvil espacio acotado que constituía su mundo visible.

El señor Casaubon, que se había levantado pronto quejándose de palpitaciones, se hallaba en la biblioteca, en conferencia con el señor Tucker, su vicario. Dentro de poco llegaría Celia en su calidad de dama de honor de la novia y también de hermana, y a lo largo de las próximas semanas habría que hacer y recibir visitas de cumplido; todo ello como parte de la vida de transición que se considera ligada a las emociones de la felicidad conyugal, y que prolonga una sensación de laboriosa ineficacia, como en un sueño que empieza a despertar sospechas en quien lo sueña. Los deberes de su vida de casada, que había considerado tan grandes de antemano, le parecían ahora tan disminuidos como los muebles y el paisaje blanco entre muros de neblina. Las despejadas alturas por donde Dorothea esperaba caminar en plena comunión con su marido se habían hecho difíciles de ver incluso con la imaginación; el delicioso reposo del alma que había de hallar en alguien completamente superior se había visto perturbado por esfuerzos intranquilos y alarmado por vagos presentimientos. ¿Cuándo comenzarían los días de su activa devoción como esposa, destinados a fortalecer la vida de su marido y a enaltecer la suya propia? Quizá nunca tal como ella los había imaginado; pero de algún modo… todavía quedaban posibilidades. En aquella unión solemnemente contraída, el deber se presentaría espontáneamente bajo alguna nueva forma de inspiración

y daría un nuevo significado al amor de esposa.

Mientras tanto allí estaba la nieve y el arco de neblina gris tan próximo al suelo… Allí estaba la sofocante opresión del mundo de las damas de elevada posición, a quienes todo se daba hecho y de quienes nadie solicitaba ayuda: un mundo en el que el sentimiento de proximidad con una existencia fecunda y múltiple solo podía conservarse dolorosamente como una visión interior, en lugar de venir de fuera con exigencias que dieran forma a sus energías. «¿Qué tengo que hacer?». «Lo que te apetezca, querida mía». Esa había sido su breve historia desde que renunció a las lecciones matutinas y a los ejercicios con ritmos estúpidos en el odiado piano. El matrimonio, que había de guiarla hacia ocupaciones valiosas y urgentes, no la había rescatado aún de la libertad opresora de las mujeres de posición: ni siquiera había llenado su tiempo libre con la alegría reflexiva de una ternura sin cortapisas. Su juventud lozana y palpitante se encontraba allí en una prisión moral que se identificaba con el paisaje gélido, incoloro y limitado, con los muebles empequeñecidos, los libros jamás leídos y el ciervo espectral en un mundo pálido y fantástico que parecía estar desvaneciéndose bajo la luz del día.

Durante los primeros minutos en que Dorothea miró al exterior solo sintió una melancólica opresión; luego surgió un vivo recuerdo y, apartándose de la ventana, empezó a dar vueltas por el cuarto. Las ideas y las esperanzas que acariciaba la primera vez que vio aquella habitación, casi tres meses antes, no eran ya más que recuerdos: las valoró como valoramos las cosas transitorias y desaparecidas. La existencia entera parecía latir con un pulso más lento que el suyo, y su fe religiosa era un grito solitario, el esfuerzo para escapar a una pesadilla en la que las cosas se marchitaban y desaparecían. En el *boudoir*, todos los objetos que recordaba habían perdido su encanto, estaban tan apagados como transparencias sin iluminar, hasta que su mirada errante se posó sobre el grupo de miniaturas, y allí, al menos, Dorothea vio algo que había cobrado nuevo aliento y significado: la miniatura de Julia, la tía del señor Casaubon y abuela de Will Ladislaw, que hizo un matrimonio desafortunado. Dorothea se la imaginó viva… y advirtió que aquel rostro de mujer poseía, a pesar de su delicadeza, un aire voluntarioso, unas peculiaridades difíciles de interpretar. ¿Eran solo sus deudos quienes consideraban desafortunado su matrimonio? ¿O había llegado también ella a la conclusión de que se trataba de un error y había tenido que gustar la sal amarga de las lágrimas en el silencio misericordioso de la noche? ¡Qué mares de experiencia parecía haber atravesado Dorothea desde la primera vez que contempló aquella miniatura! Sintió una nueva camaradería, como si el retrato tuviese oídos para ella y pudiera ver de qué manera lo estaba mirando. Allí se encontraba una mujer que había sabido de dificultades en el matrimonio. Aún más, los colores se avivaron en los labios y la barbilla pareció agrandarse, el cabello y los ojos despidieron luz, el rostro se hizo masculino y se volvió hacia ella con esa mirada intensa que dice a quien la recibe que es demasiado interesante para que el menor movimiento de sus párpados pase inadvertido o quede sin interpretar. Dorothea percibió aquella manifestación tan llena de vida como un agradable calor: notó que sonreía y, apartándose de la miniatura, se sentó y levantó la vista como si estuviera de nuevo hablando con alguien a quien tenía delante. Pero la sonrisa desapareció al continuar meditando, y al final dijo en voz alta:

—¡Fue una crueldad hablar así! ¡Qué triste…! ¡Qué espantoso!

Se levantó muy deprisa y salió de la habitación, apresurándose por el corredor, con el irresistible impulso de ir a ver a su marido y preguntarle si podía hacer algo por él. Quizá el señor Tucker se hubiese marchado y el señor Casaubon estuviera solo en la biblioteca. Dorothea sintió como si toda su melancolía matutina fuera a desvanecerse si su marido se alegraba de verla.

Cuando llegó a la oscura escalera de roble, allí estaba Celia subiendo, y más abajo el señor Brooke, intercambiando bienvenidas y felicitaciones con el señor Casaubon.

—¡Dodo! —dijo Celia con su tranquila manera de hablar, separando las sílabas; luego besó a su hermana, que la rodeó con los brazos, y no dijo ya nada más. Creo que las dos lloraron un poco a escondidas mientras Dorothea corría escaleras abajo para saludar a su tío.

—No necesito preguntarte cómo estás, querida —dijo el señor Brooke, después de besarla en la frente—. Ya veo que Roma te ha sentado bien. La felicidad, los frescos, las antigüedades… todas esas cosas. Bien, estamos contentos de tenerte de nuevo aquí, y ahora además el arte ya no tiene secretos para ti, ¿no es eso? Pero Casaubon está un poco pálido, ya ves. Estudiar tanto durante las vacaciones es llevar las cosas demasiado lejos. Yo también me excedí en una ocasión —el señor Brooke seguía apretando la mano de Dorothea, aunque se había vuelto hacia el señor Casaubon—, con motivo de unas ruinas, de unos templos y su topografía… Creía tener una pista, pero vi que me llevaría demasiado lejos y que quizá no saliera nada en claro de todo ello. Uno puede pasarse mucho tiempo haciendo cosas así sin conseguir nada, ya se sabe.

Dorothea también estaba examinando el rostro de su marido con cierta ansiedad al pensar que quienes lo veían de nuevo después de una larga ausencia podían advertir en él signos que a ella se le habían

escapado.

—No tienes por qué alarmarte —dijo el señor Brooke, observando su expresión—. Un poco de vaca y de cordero inglés lo restablecerán en seguida. La palidez estaba muy bien cuando posaba para el retrato de Tomás de Aquino, es cierto… Hemos recibido tu carta hace muy poco. Pero Tomás de Aquino, vamos a ver, ¿no era demasiado sutil? ¿Hay alguien que lo lea?

—No es, desde luego, un autor adecuado para mentes superficiales —dijo el señor Casaubon, enfrentándose a aquellas preguntas con paciencia llena de dignidad.

—¿Querrás café en tu cuarto, tío? —dijo Dorothea, acudiendo en socorro de su marido.

—Sí; y tú debes ir a hablar con Celia: tiene grandes noticias que darte, ¿sabes? Dejo que ella te lo cuente todo.

El *boudoir* verde azulado adquirió un aspecto mucho más alegre cuando Celia estuvo allí sentada, con una capa exactamente igual a la de su hermana, contemplando los camafeos con tranquila satisfacción, mientras la conversación pasaba a otros temas.

—¿Crees que es buena idea ir a Roma en viaje de novios? —dijo Celia, sonrojándose de inmediato con delicadeza, como Dorothea estaba acostumbrada a verla hacer con el más mínimo motivo.

—No le convendría a todo el mundo… A ti no te gustaría, por ejemplo —dijo Dorothea calmosamente. Nadie sabría nunca lo que realmente pensaba de una luna de miel en Roma.

—La señora Cadwallader dice que es absurdo que la gente haga un viaje tan largo cuando se casa. Asegura que los esposos acaban hartos el uno del otro, y no pueden pelearse cómodamente, como lo harían en su propia casa. Y lady Chettam dice que ella fue a Bath.

Celia cambiaba de color una y otra vez: parecía

Ir y venir con nuevas del corazón,
como si se tratara de un raudo mensajero.[72]

Aquello debía querer decir algo más que los habituales rubores de Celia.

—¡Celia! ¿Ha sucedido algo? —dijo Dorothea, en un tono lleno de afecto fraternal—. ¿Es cierto que tienes que darme grandes noticias?

—Ha sido porque tú te marchaste, Dodo, y sir James no tenía a nadie con quien hablar —dijo Celia, con cierta picardía en la mirada.

—Comprendo. Es lo que yo esperaba y creía que acabaría pasando —dijo Dorothea, cogiendo entre las manos el rostro de su hermana y mirándola casi con preocupación. El matrimonio de Celia le parecía ahora un asunto más serio que unos meses antes.

—Tan solo hace tres días —dijo Celia—. Y lady Chettam es muy amable.

—¿Y tú eres muy feliz?

—Sí. No nos vamos a casar todavía. Antes hay que prepararlo todo. Y yo no quiero casarme demasiado pronto, porque creo que es bonito estar prometida. Y después seguiremos casados toda la vida.

—Creo sinceramente que no podrías tener mejor marido, Kitty. Sir James es un hombre bueno y honorable —dijo Dorothea con calor.

—Ha seguido con las casas para los colonos, Dodo. Te lo contará él mismo cuando venga. ¿Te alegrarás de verlo?

—Claro que sí. ¿Cómo se te ocurre preguntarme eso?

—Tenía miedo de que estuvieras convirtiéndote en una persona muy instruida —dijo Celia, que consideraba el saber del señor Casaubon como una especie de humedad que pudiera con el tiempo saturar a un cuerpo vecino.

Capítulo XXIX

> Descubrí que ningún talento ajeno lograba complacerme. Mis desafortunadas paradojas habían agotado por completo esa fuente de consuelos.
>
> GOLDSMITH

Cierta mañana, varios días después de su llegada a Lowick, Dorothea… pero ¿por qué siempre Dorothea? ¿Era su punto de vista el único posible en relación con aquel matrimonio? Protesto de que se dedique todo nuestro interés, todo nuestro esfuerzo de comprensión a las jóvenes epidermis que parecen lozanas a pesar de las dificultades; porque también ellas se marchitarán y sabrán de las penas más maduras y más corrosivas que estamos contribuyendo a descuidar. A pesar de los ojos parpadeantes y de las manchas blancas en la piel que Celia encontraba tan desagradables, y de la falta de volúmenes musculares que a sir James le resultaban moralmente penosos, el señor Casaubon tenía una intensa vida interior y los mismos apetitos espirituales que todos nosotros. No había hecho nada excepcional casándose, sino algo que la sociedad aprueba y considera motivo de guirnaldas y ramos de flores. Se le ocurrió que no debía retrasar más sus intenciones matrimoniales, y se había hecho la reflexión de que, al tomar esposa, un hombre de buena posición debía buscar y elegir con cuidado a una joven en la flor de la edad —cuanto más joven mejor, porque sería más fácil educarla y tendría una actitud más sumisa—, de una posición social igual a la suya, devota, con inclinaciones virtuosas y buena capacidad intelectual. Con una joven de esas características concertaría unas capitulaciones muy generosas y no omitiría ninguna medida que asegurase su felicidad; a cambio, el señor Casaubon disfrutaría de los placeres de la familia y dejaría tras sí esa copia de uno mismo que parecía exigirse con tanto apremio de un hombre… según los autores de sonetos del siglo XVI. Los tiempos habían cambiado desde entonces, y ningún autor de sonetos insistía en que el señor Casaubon dejara una copia tras sí; más aún, el mismo interesado no había logrado siquiera producir copias de su llave de la mitología; pero siempre tuvo intención de justificarse mediante el matrimonio; y el convencimiento de que los años pasaban muy deprisa, de que el mundo se iba oscureciendo y de que él se sentía solo, era una razón poderosa para alcanzar sin demora los placeres domésticos antes de que también quedaran atrás por culpa del paso del tiempo.

Y cuando vio a Dorothea, el señor Casaubon creyó haber encontrado incluso más de lo que pedía: quizá pudiera serle de tanta ayuda como para permitirle renunciar a los servicios de un secretario contratado, colaboración que el señor Casaubon no había empleado nunca y le inspiraba una sospechosa aversión. (El señor Casaubon se daba cuenta, con el natural nerviosismo, de que se esperaba de él que pusiera de manifiesto una inteligencia poderosa). La Providencia, en su bondad, le había proporcionado la esposa que necesitaba. Una joven modesta, desprovista de ambición y con los talentos peculiares, escasamente críticos, de su sexo, siempre tendría por poderosa la inteligencia de su marido. Que la Providencia hubiera dado prueba de la misma bondad hacia la señorita Brooke al proporcionarle al señor Casaubon como marido es una idea que difícilmente hubiera podido ocurrírsele. La sociedad no plantea nunca la absurda exigencia de que un hombre piense tanto en su aptitud para hacer feliz a una encantadora joven como en la de ella para hacerlo feliz a él. ¡Como si un hombre pudiera escoger no solo a su esposa, sino al marido de su esposa! ¡O como si estuviera obligado a proporcionar mediante su propia persona buena presencia a su posteridad! Cuando Dorothea aceptó su proposición matrimonial con gran entusiasmo, el señor Casaubon lo consideró tan solo natural; y creyó que su felicidad estaba a punto de comenzar.

El marido de Dorothea no había disfrutado de muchos anticipos de felicidad en su vida anterior. Para gozar de una intensa alegría sin sólida base corporal hay que tener un alma entusiasta. El señor Casaubon no había tenido nunca una sólida base corporal y su alma era sensible sin ser entusiasta: demasiado lánguida para olvidarse de sí misma en apasionado deleite, se agitaba sobre el terreno pantanoso donde había sido incubada pensando en sus alas y sin volar nunca. Su experiencia era de esa triste clase que rehúye la compasión y teme sobre todo que llegue a conocerse bien: era la experiencia de esa orgullosa y raquítica sensibilidad que carece de masa suficiente para transformarse en afecto hacia los demás, y que vibra, filiforme, en pequeñas corrientes de ensimismamiento o, en el mejor de los casos, de escrupuloso egoísmo. Porque el señor Casaubon tenía muchos escrúpulos: era capaz de un estricto autodominio; estaba decidido a ser un hombre de honor de acuerdo con las reglas establecidas; todo el mundo tenía que reconocer que era irreprochable. En su conducta había alcanzado ya esa meta; pero la dificultad que entrañaba hacer también irreprochable su *Llave de todas las mitologías* era un peso muy difícil de soportar; porque tampoco se había reconocido, ni mucho menos, la importancia de los opúsculos —o *Parerga*[73] como él los llamaba— con los que se había presentado ante su público, depositando con ellos, al mismo tiempo, pequeños mojones eruditos de los progresos de su empresa. El señor Casaubon sospechaba que el arcediano no los había leído. Tenía dudas, que le resultaban muy dolorosas, sobre lo que realmente pensaban de ellos las mentes más preclaras de Brasenose[74], y estaba amargamente convencido de que su antiguo conocido Carp había sido el autor de la recensión despectiva que guardaba bajo llave en un cajoncito del escritorio y también en un recinto muy oscuro de su memoria. Le resultaba muy difícil luchar contra impresiones tan negativas, y eso le producía una melancólica amargura que es la consecuencia de cualquier reivindicación desproporcionada: incluso vacilaba su fe religiosa cuando dudaba de la importancia de su obra, y los consuelos de la esperanza cristiana en la inmortalidad parecían apoyarse en la inmortalidad de la *Llave de todas las mitologías*, aún sin escribir. Por mi parte reconozco que el marido de Dorothea me inspira una gran compasión. En el mejor de los casos es un destino incómodo ser lo que llamamos una persona muy instruida y no disfrutar con ello; presenciar el gran espectáculo de la vida sin librarse nunca de una subjetividad pequeña, hambrienta y temblorosa; no dejarse nunca poseer plenamente por la gloria que tenemos delante de los ojos, no lograr nunca que nuestra conciencia se transforme con entusiasmo en la intensidad de un pensamiento, en el ardor de una pasión, en la energía de una acción, y ser siempre erudito y poco inspirado, ambicioso y tímido, escrupuloso y corto de vista. Llegar a ser deán o incluso obispo significaría muy poco, me temo, para las preocupaciones del señor Casaubon. Sin duda algún griego antiguo observó ya que tras la gran máscara y el megáfono han de estar siempre nuestros pobres ojos mirando, como de costumbre, a hurtadillas, y nuestros tímidos labios, sometidos a un control no desprovisto de ansiedad.

A este estado mental delineado un cuarto de siglo antes, a esta sensibilidad así atrincherada, el señor Casaubon había tenido la idea de añadir la felicidad mediante una encantadora novia joven; pero incluso antes del matrimonio, como ya hemos visto, se deprimió al percatarse de que la nueva dicha no lo era para él. La costumbre le hacía añorar sus antiguos hábitos, más cómodos, y cuanto más profundizaba en la vida doméstica, más predominaba sobre cualquier otra satisfacción el sentido del cumplimiento del deber y de actuar con propiedad. El matrimonio, como la religión y la erudición, más aún, como la profesión de autor, estaba destinado a convertirse en un requisito exterior, y Edward Casaubon había decidido cumplir irreprochablemente cualquier requisito. Incluso lograr que Dorothea le fuese de utilidad en su estudio, de acuerdo con sus propios deseos anteriores al matrimonio, suponía un esfuerzo que siempre tenía tentaciones de aplazar y que, de no haber sido por los insistentes ruegos de su mujer, quizá nunca hubiera llegado a iniciarse. Pero Dorothea consiguió convertir en habitual su presencia en la biblioteca a una hora muy temprana, para trabajar allí leyendo en voz alta o haciendo alguna copia que se le hubiese asignado. El trabajo resultó bastante fácil de concretar porque el señor Casaubon tomó de inmediato una decisión: había que preparar un nuevo *Parergon*, una pequeña monografía sobre algunos indicios recientemente descubiertos, relativos a los misterios egipcios, a partir de los cuales se podían corregir ciertas afirmaciones de Warburton[75]. Las referencias, incluso en aquel caso, eran muy amplias, pero no ilimitadas; y había que dar forma precisa a las frases que serían escudriñadas por Brasenose y una posteridad algo menos formidable. Aquellas producciones menores, aunque monumentales, agitaban siempre al señor Casaubon; la digestión se le hacía difícil por la interferencia de citas, o por la rivalidad de frases dialécticas que resonaban unas contra otras dentro de su cerebro. Y también tenía que haber una dedicatoria en latín sobre la que todo estaba aún por decidir excepto que no sería para Carp: el señor Casaubon sentía aún como una herida emponzoñada el hecho de que en una ocasión hubiese dedicado una publicación a Carp, incluyendo a aquel miembro del reino animal entre los *viros nullo aevo perituros*[76], un error que infaliblemente

expondría al ridículo al autor de la dedicatoria en épocas futuras, y que incluso podía provocar las risas burlonas de Pike y Tench en la presente.

De manera que el señor Casaubon se hallaba en uno de sus períodos más ocupados y, como he empezado a decir hace poco, Dorothea fue temprano a la biblioteca, donde su marido había desayunado solo. Celia hacía por entonces su segunda visita a Lowick, probablemente la última antes de su boda, y se hallaba en el salón esperando a sir James.

Dorothea había aprendido a leer los signos del estado de ánimo de su marido y vio al entrar en la biblioteca que la mañana se había vuelto más brumosa durante la última hora. Ya se dirigía en silencio hacia su escritorio cuando el señor Casaubon, con el tono distante de quien cumple un deber desagradable, dijo:

—Dorothea, aquí hay una carta para ti, que ha llegado dentro de otra dirigida a mí.

Era una carta de dos páginas, y Dorothea miró inmediatamente la firma.

—¡El señor Ladislaw! ¿Qué puede tener que decirme? —exclamó, con tono de agradable sorpresa—. Pero —añadió, mirando al señor Casaubon— sí me imagino el motivo de que te haya escrito a ti.

—Puedes, si lo deseas, leer la carta —dijo el señor Casaubon, señalándola con la pluma con gesto severo, y sin mirar a su esposa—. Aunque quizá no esté de más advertirte de que debo rechazar la propuesta que contiene de hacernos una visita. Confío en que se me disculpe por desear un paréntesis en el que me vea completamente libre de distracciones como las que han sido inevitables hasta este momento, y en especial de huéspedes cuya errática vivacidad hace fatigosa su presencia.

No se había producido ningún enfrentamiento entre los cónyuges desde la pequeña explosión en Roma, de huellas tan profundas en el espíritu de Dorothea, a quien desde entonces le había resultado más fácil sofocar sus emociones que enfrentarse a las consecuencias de manifestarlas. Pero aquel malhumorado suponer que ella pudiera desear visitas desagradables para su marido, aquella gratuita defensa de sí mismo contra unas supuestas quejas egoístas de su mujer, era un aguijonazo demasiado doloroso para limitarse a meditar sobre ello hasta después de pasado el efecto. Dorothea creía que podría haber sido paciente con John Milton, pero nunca imaginó que el poeta se comportara de aquella manera; y por un momento el señor Casaubon le pareció estúpidamente obtuso y odiosamente injusto. La compasión, aquel «niño recién nacido», que con el tiempo dominaría muchas de sus tempestades interiores, no «superó el obstáculo con una zancada»[77] en aquella ocasión. Con sus primeras palabras, pronunciadas en un tono que hizo estremecer al señor Casaubon, Dorothea logró que su marido la mirase y se enfrentara con el relámpago de sus ojos.

—¿Cómo se te ocurre que yo pueda desear algo que te moleste? Me hablas como si pusiera obstáculos en tu camino. Espera al menos a que dé muestras de anteponer mis gustos a los tuyos.

—Hablas con precipitación, Dorothea —respondió el señor Casaubon, con nerviosismo.

Sin duda, aquella mujer era demasiado joven para el formidable rango de esposa: para ello tendría que haber sido una criatura descolorida y sin personalidad y dispuesta a aceptarlo todo sin discusión.

—Creo que has sido tú el primero que se ha precipitado con tus falsas suposiciones sobre mis sentimientos —dijo Dorothea en el mismo tono. El fuego no estaba aún apagado, y le parecía innoble que su marido no se disculpara.

—Si te parece, vamos a no hablar más del asunto, Dorothea. Carezco de tiempo y de energía para este tipo de discusión.

Aquí el señor Casaubon mojó la pluma e hizo intención de continuar escribiendo aunque le temblaba tanto la mano que parecía formar las palabras con caracteres desconocidos. Hay respuestas que, al rechazar la cólera, solo consiguen enviarla al otro extremo de la habitación, y ver cómo se descarta fríamente una discusión cuando se piensa que la justicia está toda del lado propio es aún más exasperante en el matrimonio que en la filosofía.

Dorothea dejó sobre el escritorio de su marido las dos cartas de Ladislaw y se dirigió a su sitio habitual, negándose a leerlas por el desprecio y la indignación que sentía dentro de sí, de la misma manera que nos desprendemos con violencia de cualquier fruslería que aparentemente nos hace sospechosos de vulgar codicia. No adivinaba en absoluto los sutiles motivos del mal humor que aquellas cartas habían producido en el señor Casaubon: solo se daba cuenta de la ofensa recibida. Dorothea se puso a trabajar de inmediato, sin que le temblara la mano; por el contrario, al transcribir las citas que le habían sido asignadas el día anterior, sintió que le estaba saliendo una hermosa caligrafía y que empezaba a entender con más claridad que de costumbre. Había en su indignación un sentimiento de superioridad, que se traducía por el momento en la firmeza de los rasgos al escribir, sin transformarse en una clara voz interior que calificara de pobre hombre al «afable arcángel» de otros tiempos.

Cuando aquella calma aparente había durado ya media hora sin que Dorothea levantara los ojos de la mesa, oyó de repente el ruido de un libro al caer al suelo y, al volverse en seguida, vio a su marido sobre la escalera de mano de la librería, encorvado hacia adelante, como si se encontrara mal. Dorothea se levantó y acudió a su lado: era evidente que le costaba mucho trabajo respirar. Subiéndose a un taburete, llegó a la altura del codo de su marido y dijo con toda el alma fundida en tierno sobresalto:

—¿Puedes apoyarte en mí, querido?

El señor Casaubon estuvo inmóvil durante dos o tres minutos que a ella le parecieron eternos, sin poder hablar ni moverse, tratando de recobrar el aliento. Cuando por fin bajó los tres peldaños y se desplomó en la amplia silla que Dorothea había acercado al pie de la escalera, ya no jadeaba pero parecía muy debilitado y a punto de desmayarse. Dorothea tocó enérgicamente la campanilla y con ayuda de los criados trasladó a su marido hasta el sillón: el señor Casaubon no llegó a desmayarse, y estaba recuperándose poco a poco cuando apareció sir James Chettam, que había sido recibido a la entrada de la casa con la noticia de que el dueño de la casa había «tenido un ataque en la biblioteca».

«¡Cielo santo! Eso era exactamente lo que cabía esperar», pensó de inmediato el baronet. Si a su alma profética se le hubiera exigido ser más explícita, sir James habría elegido precisamente la expresión «ataques». Preguntó a su informador, el mayordomo, si se había enviado a buscar al doctor. El mayordomo no sabía que su amo hubiera deseado nunca la presencia del doctor; ¿no bastaría con mandar a por un simple médico?

Cuando sir James entró en la biblioteca, sin embargo, el señor Casaubon estaba ya en condiciones de dar algunas muestras de su habitual cortesía, y Dorothea, que en reacción a su primer espanto había estado arrodillada y sollozando a su lado, se levantó y propuso asimismo que alguien saliera a caballo en busca de un médico.

—Le recomiendo que mande a por Lydgate —dijo sir James—. Mi madre ha recurrido a él, y encuentra que su inteligencia está por encima de lo corriente. Y tenía mala opinión de los médicos desde la muerte de mi padre.

Dorothea apeló a su marido, que hizo en silencio un gesto de aprobación. De manera que se mandó a buscar a Lydgate y este llegó muy pronto, porque el mensajero, que era el criado de sir James y conocía al señor Lydgate, se lo encontró caminando junto a su caballo por la carretera de Lowick del brazo de la señorita Vincy.

Celia, que estaba en el salón, no supo nada de lo sucedido hasta que se lo contó sir James. Después de escuchar a Dorothea, no pensaba ya que se tratara de un ataque, pero sí de algo parecido.

—Pobre Dodo… ¡Qué cosa tan terrible! —dijo Celia, sintiéndose todo lo dolida que su perfecta felicidad le permitía. Tenía las manos entrelazadas y sir James las rodeaba con las suyas, como un capullo abrazado por un amplio cáliz—. Es espantoso que el señor Casaubon se haya puesto enfermo, pero a mí no me ha gustado nunca. Y creo que no quiere a Dorothea ni la mitad de lo que debiera, porque estoy segura de que nadie más se hubiera casado con él, ¿no lo crees así?

—Siempre me ha parecido horrible que tu hermana se sacrificara de esa manera —dijo sir James.

—Sí. Pero la pobre Dodo nunca ha hecho lo mismo que las demás personas y creo que no lo hará jamás.

—Es una noble criatura —dijo el fiel sir James. Acababa de recibir una nueva impresión, al ver cómo Dorothea pasaba con ternura el brazo alrededor del cuello de su marido mientras lo contemplaba con indescriptible aflicción. El baronet ignoraba cuánto arrepentimiento había en aquel dolor.

—Sí —dijo Celia, pensando que estaba muy bien que sir James dijera aquello, pero convencida de que no se hubiera sentido a gusto con Dodo—. ¿Debo ir con ella? ¿Crees que puedo ayudarla?

—Creo que estaría bien que la vieras antes de que llegue Lydgate —dijo sir James, magnánimamente—. Pero no te quedes mucho rato con ella.

Mientras Celia estuvo ausente, sir James paseó de un lado a otro por la habitación recordando lo que había sentido al principio a raíz del compromiso matrimonial de Dorothea, y notando cómo revivía su indignación ante la indiferencia del señor Brooke. Si Cadwallader… si todos los demás hubiesen opinado como él, quizá se habría impedido el matrimonio. Era una iniquidad permitir que una muchacha tan joven decidiera ciegamente sobre su destino de aquella forma, sin hacer el menor esfuerzo por salvarla. Ya hacía tiempo que sir James había dejado de sentirlo por razones personales: su corazón estaba satisfecho con su compromiso con Celia. Su alma caballerosa (¿no figuraba el servicio desinteresado a la mujer entre los timbres de gloria de la antigua caballería?) impidió que aquel amor no correspondido se transformase en amargura, y su muerte produjo dulces aromas… recuerdos incorpóreos que se adherían a Dorothea con un efecto sacralizante. Sir James seguiría siendo su amigo fraternal, capaz de interpretar sus acciones con generosa y absoluta confianza.

Capítulo xxx

Qui veut délasser hors de propos, lasse.[78]

PASCAL

El señor Casaubon no tuvo un segundo episodio semejante al primero, y al cabo de unos días empezó a recobrar su habitual estado de salud. Pero Lydgate parecía pensar que el caso necesitaba muchos cuidados. No solo usaba el estetoscopio (que por aquella época no se había convertido aún en instrumento de uso corriente), sino que se quedaba mucho tiempo junto al paciente examinándolo. A las preguntas que Casaubon le hacía replicaba que la causa de la enfermedad era el error común a los intelectuales: aplicarse a su tarea con demasiada intensidad y perseverancia; el remedio, conformarse con un trabajo más moderado y buscar alguna distracción. El señor Brooke, que se hallaba presente en una ocasión, sugirió que el señor Casaubon fuese de pesca, como hacía Cadwallader, y tuviera un taller para hacer juguetes, patas de mesa y otras cosas parecidas.

—En resumen: usted me recomienda que adelante la llegada de la segunda infancia —dijo el pobre Casaubon con cierta amargura—. Esas ocupaciones —añadió, mirando a Lydgate— supondrían para mí la misma distracción que para un encarcelado fabricar cuerdas.

—Confieso —dijo Lydgate sonriendo— que divertirse es una prescripción muy poco satisfactoria. Es como decirle a la gente que no se desanime. Quizá sea mejor decir que debe usted aceptar cierta dosis de aburrimiento en lugar de seguir trabajando.

—Sí, claro —dijo el señor Brooke—. Haga que Dorothea juegue con usted al chaquete por las noches. Y al badminton, desde luego… No conozco otro juego mejor que el badminton durante el día. Me acuerdo de cuando estaba muy de moda. Aunque es cierto que quizá sus ojos no lo resistan, Casaubon. Pero tiene usted que distraerse, no hay duda. Quizá podría dedicarse a algún estudio de poca trascendencia: a la conquiliología, por ejemplo; siempre pienso que eso debe de ser fácil. O que Dorothea le lea cosas ligeras, Smollett: *Roderick Random, Humphry Clincker*. Son obras un poco vulgares, pero ahora que está casada puede leer cualquier cosa, ya se sabe. Recuerdo que me hicieron reír muchísimo… Hay un trozo muy divertido sobre los pantalones de un postillón. Ahora ya no tenemos humor como aquel. Yo he probado todas esas cosas, pero quizá a usted le resulten bastante nuevas.

«Tan nuevo como comer cardos borriqueros» hubiese sido una respuesta que expresara los sentimientos del señor Casaubon. Pero se limitó a hacer una resignada inclinación de cabeza, con el debido respeto al tío de su mujer, y a observar que sin duda las ocupaciones mencionadas habían «servido como recurso a determinadas personas».

—Ya ve usted —dijo el hábil magistrado a Lydgate cuando abandonaron juntos la habitación— que Casaubon ha sido siempre demasiado riguroso: eso explica que no sepa qué hacer cuando se le prohíbe su trabajo habitual, aunque estoy convencido de que es una cosa muy seria, desde luego, en la línea de la investigación, ya sabe. Yo nunca me dejaría llevar de esa manera; siempre he sido muy versátil. Pero un clérigo está un poco más atado. ¡Si lo hicieran obispo!… Preparó un folleto muy bueno para Peel. En ese caso tendría más movimiento, sería necesario que se dejara ver más; quizá ganara un poco de peso. Le recomiendo que hable con la señora Casaubon. Mi sobrina tiene inteligencia suficiente para cualquier cosa. Dígale a ella que su marido necesita una vida más animada, distracciones: que su táctica debe ser divertirlo.

Sin necesidad del consejo del señor Brooke, Lydgate había decidido hablar con Dorothea, que no estuvo

presente mientras su tío lanzaba sus amables sugerencias sobre cómo hacer más animada la vida en Lowick, pero que de ordinario se encontraba al lado de su marido; los sinceros signos de intensa inquietud que aparecían en su rostro y en su voz al plantearse cualquier cosa relacionada con el estado de ánimo o con la salud del señor Casaubon constituían un drama que a Lydgate no le disgustaba contemplar. El joven médico pensó que se limitaba a hacer lo más conveniente contándole la verdad sobre lo que, probablemente, el futuro reservaba a su marido, pero es cierto que también se le ocurrió que sería interesante hablar de manera confidencial con ella. A un profesional de la medicina le gusta hacer observaciones psicológicas y, a veces, al dedicarse a esos estudios cae con facilidad en la tentación de hacer profecías trascendentales que la vida y la muerte deshacen de un plumazo. Con frecuencia, Lydgate había comentado de forma satírica tales predicciones gratuitas, y ahora tenía intención de mostrarse muy precavido.

El joven médico preguntó por la señora Casaubon y, al ser informado de que había salido a pasear, se disponía a marcharse cuando aparecieron Dorothea y Celia, las dos con las mejillas encendidas por el viento de marzo. Cuando Lydgate solicitó hablar a solas con ella, Dorothea abrió la puerta de la biblioteca, que era la que estaba más cerca, pensando tan solo en lo que el médico pudiera decirle sobre el señor Casaubon. Era la primera vez que entraba en aquel cuarto desde que enfermó su marido, y el criado había optado por no abrir las contraventanas, aunque había suficiente luz para leer gracias a los estrechos entrepaños situados encima.

—Espero que no le importe que haya tan poca luz —dijo Dorothea, de pie en el centro de la habitación —. Desde que usted prohibió los libros, la biblioteca ha quedado clausurada. Pero confío en que el señor Casaubon vuelva aquí muy pronto. ¿No está progresando?

—Sí, mucho más deprisa de lo que yo esperaba en un principio. De hecho, casi ha recuperado ya su estado habitual de salud.

—¿Acaso teme usted una recaída? —dijo Dorothea, cuyo oído había advertido un tono peculiar en las palabras de Lydgate.

—No es nada fácil pronunciarse en estos casos —respondió el médico—. Lo único que puedo decir con seguridad es que sería deseable mantener al señor Casaubon bajo continua vigilancia, para que no fuerce de algún modo sus energías psíquicas.

—Le ruego que hable con toda claridad —dijo Dorothea con tono suplicante—. No soporto la idea de que haya algo que no sé y que de haberlo sabido me hubiese hecho actuar de manera distinta. —Las palabras salieron de su boca como un gemido; eran sin duda la voz de una experiencia no muy lejana—. Siéntese —añadió, acomodándose en la silla más cercana y quitándose el sombrero y los guantes, con una instintiva supresión de convenciones al aparecer un gran interrogante del destino.

—Lo que usted ha dicho justifica mi punto de vista —dijo Lydgate—. Creo que mi función como médico es prevenir al máximo ese tipo de remordimientos. Pero comprenda, por favor, que el caso del señor Casaubon es precisamente de aquellos en los que resulta más difícil pronunciarse sobre un posible desenlace. Quizá viva otros quince años o más, con un estado de salud muy similar al de antes de la enfermedad.

Dorothea había palidecido extraordinariamente y, al hacer Lydgate una pausa, dijo en voz baja:

—En el caso de que tengamos mucho cuidado.

—Sí… Mucho cuidado para evitar toda agitación mental y también una excesiva aplicación a sus tareas.

—Sería muy desgraciado si tuviera que renunciar a su trabajo —dijo Dorothea, con una rápida intuición de lo que aquello significaría para su marido.

—Me doy cuenta perfectamente. El único procedimiento es tratar por todos los medios, directos e indirectos, de moderar y dar variedad a sus ocupaciones. Si las circunstancias ambientales son adecuadas, no existe, como ya he dicho, un peligro inmediato en razón de la afección cardíaca que ha sido a mi juicio la causa de su reciente indisposición. Por otra parte, cabe que la enfermedad avance con mayor rapidez: se trata de uno de esos casos en los que a veces la muerte es repentina. No hay que descuidar nada que pudiera quedar afectado por ese posible desenlace.

Reinó el silencio durante unos momentos, mientras Dorothea daba la impresión de haberse convertido en estatua de mármol, aunque en su interior la vida era tan intensa que su pensamiento nunca había repasado en tan poco tiempo tal variedad de escenas y motivos.

—Ayúdeme, se lo suplico —dijo, finalmente, en el mismo tono de voz que unos momentos antes—. Dígame qué puedo hacer.

—¿Qué le parece un viaje al extranjero? Creo que ha estado usted en Roma hace poco.

Los recuerdos que hacían totalmente inaceptable aquella posibilidad crearon una nueva corriente de emociones que acabó con la pálida inmovilidad de Dorothea.

—Eso no serviría de nada… Sería peor que cualquier otra cosa —dijo con un abatimiento que tenía mucho de infantil, mientras le caían las lágrimas por las mejillas—. Nada será de utilidad a no ser que mi marido disfrute con ello.

—Quisiera haberle evitado este sufrimiento —dijo Lydgate muy conmovido, pero interrogándose al mismo tiempo sobre aquel matrimonio. Mujeres como Dorothea quedaban fuera de su experiencia personal y familiar.

—Ha hecho bien hablando conmigo. Le agradezco su sinceridad.

—Deseo que comprenda que no voy a contarle nada de esto al señor Casaubon. Creo conveniente que solo esté al tanto de que le conviene no trabajar más de la cuenta y observar ciertas reglas. La angustia, por cualquier motivo, sería el factor más contraproducente.

Lydgate se puso en pie y Dorothea se levantó también de manera maquinal, desabrochándose la capa y quitándosela como si la sofocara. El médico ya estaba haciendo una inclinación de cabeza para marcharse cuando un impulso, que de hallarse sola se habría convertido en oración, hizo que la señora Casaubon dijera con un sollozo en la voz:

—Usted es un hombre sabio, ¿no es cierto? Usted lo sabe todo sobre la vida y la muerte. Aconséjeme. Piense qué es lo que puedo hacer. Mi marido se ha esforzado toda la vida, mirando siempre al futuro. No le interesa ninguna otra cosa. Ni tampoco a mí…

Lydgate recordaría durante años la impresión que le produjo aquella súplica involuntaria, aquel grito de alma a alma, sin otra base que el hecho de moverse, como espíritus afines, en un medio sumamente confuso, en la misma vida incierta y caprichosamente iluminada. Pero ¿qué podía decir él en aquel momento, excepto que volvería al día siguiente para ver al enfermo?

Cuando se hubo marchado, las lágrimas de Dorothea brotaron con más facilidad, aliviando la opresión que la sofocaba. Luego se secó los ojos, se recordó a sí misma que no debía dejar traslucir su angustia en presencia de su marido y paseó la mirada por la habitación pensando en pedir al criado que volviera a ocuparse de ella como antes, ya que el señor Casaubon querría utilizarla en cualquier momento. Sobre el escritorio se encontraban las cartas que nadie había tocado desde la mañana de su enfermedad, incluidas, como Dorothea recordaba muy bien, las dos del joven Ladislaw, y una, la dirigida a ella, todavía sin abrir. El recuerdo de aquellas cartas se había hecho aún más penoso por la repentina indisposición de su marido, indisposición a la que quizá ella había contribuido con su enfado; pensando que ya tendría ocasión de leerlas cuando volviera a encontrarlas, Dorothea no se había sentido inclinada a ir a buscarlas a la biblioteca. Pero ahora se le ocurrió que su marido no debía verlas más: fuera cual fuese la causa de su desagrado, no convenía, si era posible, que aquella contrariedad se repitiera; y, en primer lugar, echó un vistazo a la carta dirigida al señor Casaubon, para averiguar así cómo evitar la ofensiva visita.

Will escribía desde Roma y empezaba diciendo que su deuda con el señor Casaubon era demasiado grande para que no pareciera impertinente intentar darle las gracias. Si no estuviera agradecido, sería el bribón más mezquino que jamás había encontrado un amigo generoso. Extenderse en palabras de agradecimiento sería lo mismo que decir: «Soy una persona honrada». Pero Will había llegado a darse cuenta de que sus defectos —defectos que el mismo señor Casaubon le había señalado con frecuencia— precisaban, para corregirse, la situación de estrechez económica que la generosidad de su pariente había evitado hasta aquel momento. Will confiaba en que haría la mejor restitución, si la restitución era posible, mostrando la eficacia de la educación por la que se hallaba en deuda y haciendo innecesaria en el futuro cualquier desviación hacia su persona de fondos a los que otros pudieran tener más derecho. Volvía a Inglaterra para probar fortuna, como se veían obligados a hacer muchos jóvenes sin otro capital que su inteligencia. Su amigo Naumann le había pedido que tomara a su cargo la *Disputa*, el cuadro pintado para el señor Casaubon, y que con su permiso, y el de la señora Casaubon, llevaría hasta Lowick en persona. Una carta dirigida a la lista de correos en París durante los siguientes quince días le impediría, si fuese necesario, llegar en un momento inoportuno. El señor Ladislaw adjuntaba una carta para la señora Casaubon en la que proseguía una conversación sobre arte iniciada con ella en Roma.

Al abrirla Dorothea vio que era una animada continuación de los reproches que el joven le había dirigido por lo extremado de sus preferencias y su incapacidad para disfrutar de manera imparcial con las cosas tal como eran: una efusión de entusiasmo juvenil que le fue imposible leer en aquel momento. Tenía que pensar de inmediato qué debía hacerse con la otra carta; quizá aún había tiempo para impedir la visita. Dorothea terminó por dársela a su tío, que se encontraba aún en la casa, pidiéndole que hiciera saber a Ladislaw la enfermedad del señor Casaubon y que su salud no le permitía recibir a ningún huésped.

—Claro que le escribiré. Ese joven es un muchacho muy inteligente y estoy seguro de que llegará lejos. Su carta está muy bien: pone de manifiesto su buen sentido, ¿te das cuenta? De todas formas le diré lo de

Casaubon.

Pero la pluma del señor Brooke era un órgano pensante que producía frases, sobre todo con intención benévola, antes de que el resto de su intelecto pudiera controlarlas con eficacia; expresaba condolencias y proponía remedios que, cuando el señor Brooke los leía, le parecían muy bien redactados; que eran, sorprendentemente, ni más ni menos que lo que había que decir y que exigían una continuación que él no había previsto. En aquel caso, a su pluma le pareció tan lamentable que el joven Ladislaw no estuviera con él en aquel momento, para poder llegar a conocerlo mejor y revisar los dos juntos los dibujos italianos olvidados durante tanto tiempo (pues su pluma sentía también mucho interés por un joven que empezaba a vivir con una buena provisión de ideas), que hacia el final de la segunda página había persuadido al señor Brooke para que invitase al joven Ladislaw a venir a Tipton Grange puesto que no podía ser recibido en Lowick. ¿Por qué no? Encontrarían muchas cosas que hacer juntos y además vivían en un período en transformación —el horizonte político se estaba ampliando—; en resumen, la pluma del señor Brooke se lanzó a reproducir un pequeño discurso que había presentado recientemente para aquel órgano, dirigido de manera tan imperfecta, que era el *Pionero de Middlemarch*. Mientras cerraba la carta, se sintió entusiasmado ante un flujo repentino de vagos proyectos: un joven capaz de dar forma a las ideas, la compra del *Pionero* para abrir camino a un nuevo candidato, la utilización de documentos; ¿quién era capaz de saber lo que podía salir de allí? Puesto que Celia se iba a casar en seguida, sería muy agradable sentar a un joven a su mesa aunque solo fuera por poco tiempo.

El señor Brooke abandonó Lowick sin decirle a Dorothea el contenido de su carta, porque estaba ocupada con su marido y, de hecho, aquellas cosas no tenían la menor importancia para ella.

Capítulo XXXI

¿Cómo descubrirás la voz de esa campana
que es demasiado grande para que tú la muevas? Basta que una flauta
suene bajo el metal delicadamente fundido: escucha con atención
hasta que suene la nota adecuada, un arroyuelo plateado:
entonces temblará la gran campana… Entonces su masa
responderá unánime con miles de ondas en suave y dulce armonía.

Aquella noche Lydgate habló a Rosamond de la señora Casaubon y puso de relieve los profundos sentimientos que parecía inspirarle el ceremonioso erudito treinta años mayor que ella.

—Es lógico que se consagre a su marido —dijo Rosamond, dando por sentada una idea de inevitable causalidad que el hombre de ciencia consideró especialmente encantadora en una mujer; si bien la señorita Vincy pensaba al mismo tiempo que no era tan melancólico, después de todo, ser la señora de Lowick Manor con un marido que con toda probabilidad se moriría muy pronto—. ¿La encuentra usted bien parecida?

—No hay duda de que lo es, pero no he pensado en ello —dijo Lydgate.

—Supongo que sería una actitud poco profesional —dijo Rosamond, formándosele hoyuelos en las mejillas al sonreír—. Pero ¡cómo se está extendiendo su clientela! Primero le llamaron los Chettam, según creo; y ahora los Casaubon.

—Sí —dijo él, con tono de quien se ve obligado a admitir una verdad—. Pero en realidad no me gusta tanto atender a esas personas como a los pobres. Los casos son más monótonos y hay que soportar más naderías y escuchar estupideces más respetuosamente.

—Ni más ni menos que en Middlemarch —dijo Rosamond—. Y por lo menos atraviesa usted corredores amplios y siente el perfume de rosas por todas partes.

—Eso es cierto, *mademoiselle* de Montmorenci[79] —dijo Lydgate, inclinando la cabeza hacia la mesa y alzando con el dedo índice el delicado pañuelo de Rosamond, situado en la boca de su bolso, como para disfrutar con su aroma, mientras la miraba sonriente.

Pero aquella conveniente libertad, como de vacaciones, con la que Lydgate revoloteaba en torno a la flor de Middlemarch no podía continuar de manera indefinida. En aquella ciudad era tan imposible aislarse socialmente como en cualquier otro sitio, y dos personas que flirtean con perseverancia no escapan a «los diferentes enredos, pesos, golpes, encontronazos y movimientos con que las cosas, cada una por separado, siguen su camino»[80]. Todo lo que la señorita Vincy hacía se notaba, y quizá resultaba más llamativo para admiradores y críticos porque en aquel momento preciso su mamá, la señora Vincy, después de algún forcejeo, se había ido con Fred a pasar una temporada en Stone Court, al no existir otro medio de complacer al viejo Featherstone y de mantener la guardia contra Mary Garth, una nuera cada vez menos aceptable a medida que la salud de Fred mejoraba.

Su tía Harriet, por ejemplo, iba a Lowick Gate a ver a Rosamond con más frecuencia ahora que estaba sola. Porque la señora Bulstrode tenía verdaderos sentimientos fraternales por su hermano; aunque seguía convencida de que podría haberse casado mejor, estaba llena de buenos deseos hacia sus sobrinos. Ahora bien, la señora Bulstrode disfrutaba de una intimidad muy antigua con la señora Plymdale. Tenían prácticamente los mismos gustos en sedas, patrones para ropa interior, porcelana y eclesiásticos; se confiaban mutuamente sus pequeños problemas de salud y de administración doméstica, y algunos puntos

de superioridad por parte de la señora Bulstrode, como su mayor firmeza, su admiración por la inteligencia y ser dueña de una casa fuera de la ciudad, servían a veces para dar color a su conversación sin llegar a dividirlas: las dos eran personas bienintencionadas, que sabían muy poco de los motivos reales que las impulsaban a obrar.

La señora Bulstrode, al hacer una visita matutina a la señora Plymdale, dijo que no podía quedarse más tiempo porque iba a ver a la pobre Rosamond.

—¿Por qué dices «pobre Rosamond»? —preguntó la señora Plymdale, una mujercilla angulosa de ojos redondos, semejante a un halcón domesticado.

—Porque es muy bonita y la han criado con mucho atolondramiento. La madre, como muy bien sabes, siempre ha sido frívola y eso hace que me preocupe por sus hijos.

—Bueno, Harriet, si tengo que decir lo que pienso —exclamó la señora Plymdale con mucho énfasis—, te confesaré que cualquiera os supondría a ti y al señor Bulstrode encantados con lo que ha sucedido, porque habéis hecho todo lo posible por ayudar al señor Lydgate.

—¿A qué te refieres, Selina? —dijo la señora Bulstrode, sinceramente sorprendida.

—Nada, excepto que os estoy muy agradecida por Ned —replicó la señora Plymdale—. Sin duda podría permitirse mejor que otras personas mantener una esposa como Rosamond; pero me gustaría que buscara en otro sitio. Sin embargo, una madre tiene sus preocupaciones y algunos jóvenes podrían darse a la mala vida por un desengaño. Además, si me viera obligada a hablar, diría que no me gustan los forasteros.

—Eso no, Selina —exclamó la señora Bulstrode, con cierto énfasis en la voz—. El señor Bulstrode fue forastero aquí en otro tiempo. Abraham y Moisés eran forasteros y en la Biblia se nos dice que hospedemos a los extraños. Especialmente —añadió después de una breve pausa—, cuando se trata de personas intachables.

—No hablaba en sentido religioso, Harriet. Hablaba como madre.

—Selina, tengo la certeza de que nunca me has oído la menor objeción a que una sobrina mía se case con tu hijo.

—Es el orgullo de la señorita Vincy… Estoy segura de que no es otra cosa —dijo la señora Plymdale, que nunca había abierto del todo su corazón a Harriet sobre aquel tema—. Ningún joven de Middlemarch es lo bastante bueno para esa chica: se lo he oído decir a su madre. Creo que esa no es una actitud cristiana. Pero ahora, por lo que oigo, ha encontrado un hombre tan orgulloso como ella.

—¿No querrás decir que hay algo entre Rosamond y el señor Lydgate? —dijo la señora Bulstrode, bastante dolida al descubrir su propia ignorancia.

—¿Es posible que no estés enterada, Harriet?

—Ya sabes que salgo muy poco; y no soy aficionada al chismorreo; en realidad, nunca oigo nada. Tú ves a muchas personas con las que yo no tengo trato. Tu círculo de amistades es bastante distinto del nuestro.

—Sí, pero se trata de tu sobrina y del gran predilecto del señor Bulstrode… y también tuyo, ¡no digas que no, Harriet! Hubo un momento en que me pareció que pensabas en él para Kate, cuando fuera un poco mayor.

—No creo que haya nada serio entre ellos ahora mismo —dijo la señora Bulstrode—. Mi hermano me habría informado sin duda alguna.

—Bueno, no todo el mundo hace las cosas igual, pero tengo entendido que la ciudad entera piensa, cuando ven juntos a la señorita Vincy y al señor Lydgate, que están prometidos. En cualquier caso, no es asunto mío. ¿Debo guardar el patrón de los mitones?

Después de aquello la señora Bulstrode se dirigió a ver a su sobrina con una nueva preocupación. Ella iba vestida con elegancia, pero advirtió, con más pesar que de ordinario, que Rosamond, recién vuelta a casa y todavía en traje de calle, llevaba una ropa casi tan costosa como la suya. La señora Bulstrode era una edición femenina y más pequeña de su hermano, pero no tenía nada de la descolorida palidez de su marido. Miraba a las personas a los ojos con sinceridad y no utilizaba circunloquios de ninguna clase.

—Veo que estás sola —dijo, mientras entraban juntas en el salón, mirando a su alrededor con expresión seria. Rosamond tuvo la seguridad de que su tía quería decirle algo especial y se sentaron muy cerca la una de la otra. Sin embargo, el acanalado del sombrero de Rosamond era tan delicioso que resultaba imposible no desear el mismo tipo de adorno para Kate, y los ojos de la señora Bulstrode, que eran bastante penetrantes, fueron recorriendo aquel amplio circuito acanalado mientras hablaba.

—Acabo de oír algo sobre ti que me ha sorprendido muchísimo, Rosamond.

—¿Y qué es, tía? —También los ojos de Rosamond examinaban los bordados que su tía llevaba en torno al cuello.

—Me cuesta trabajo creerlo… que te hayas prometido sin saberlo yo… sin que tu padre me lo haya

dicho. —Aquí los ojos de la señora Bulstrode se encontraron finalmente con los de Rosamond, que se puso muy colorada y dijo:

—No estoy prometida, tía.

—¿Cómo es posible entonces que lo diga todo el mundo… que sea la comidilla de la ciudad?

—Lo que se diga en la ciudad tiene muy poca importancia en mi opinión —dijo Rosamond, interiormente halagada.

—Has de ser más prudente; no desprecies tanto a tus vecinos. Recuerda que ya has cumplido los veintidós y que careces de fortuna: estoy segura de que tu padre no podrá darte una dote. El señor Lydgate es muy intelectual y muy brillante; sé que eso tiene su atractivo. A mí también me gusta hablar con personas así; y tu tío lo considera una persona muy útil. Pero su profesión da muy poco dinero en un sitio como Middlemarch. Es cierto que la vida terrena no lo es todo; aunque es muy raro que un médico tenga opiniones verdaderamente religiosas… hay demasiado orgullo en la inteligencia. Y tú no sirves para casarte con un hombre pobre.

—El señor Lydgate no es un hombre pobre, tía. Está emparentado con personas muy importantes.

—Él mismo me dijo que era pobre.

—Eso se debe a que está acostumbrado a tratar con personas de posición social muy elevada.

—Mi querida Rosamond, no debes pensar en vivir lujosamente.

Rosamond bajó la vista y jugueteó con el bolso. No era una joven fogosa y no daba nunca malas contestaciones, pero tenía intención de vivir como le apeteciera.

—¿Entonces es cierto? —dijo la señora Bulstrode, mirando fijamente a su sobrina—. Estás pensando en el señor Lydgate: hay algún entendimiento entre vosotros, aunque tu padre no lo sabe. Sé franca, Rosamond: ¿es verdad que el señor Lydgate te ha pedido en matrimonio?

La pobre Rosamond comprendió que su posición era muy desagradable. Hasta entonces se había sentido muy segura de los sentimientos y de las intenciones de Lydgate, pero ahora, cuando su tía le hacía aquella pregunta, le disgustaba no poder responder afirmativamente.

Su orgullo se sintió herido, pero vino a ayudarla el autodominio que nunca le faltaba.

—Discúlpame, tía, pero preferiría no hablar sobre ese tema.

—Confío en que no entregues tu corazón a un hombre sin tener unas perspectivas muy claras, ¡sobre todo si pienso en los dos excelentes partidos que sé que has rechazado!… uno todavía a tu alcance si te decidieras. Sé de una mujer muy hermosa que acabó casándose mal por hacer eso. Ned Plymdale es un muchacho muy agradable… Hay quien diría que es bien parecido; es hijo único; y un negocio importante como el suyo es mejor que una profesión. No es que casarse lo sea todo. Me gustaría que buscaras primero el reino de Dios. Pero una muchacha no debe perder nunca el control de su propio corazón.

—Nunca se lo daría a Ned Plymdale, si así fuera. Ya lo he rechazado en una ocasión. Si amase a alguien, lo haría de inmediato y sin cambio posible —dijo Rosamond, muy convencida de ser una heroína romántica, e interpretando el papel a la perfección.

—Ya veo cómo están las cosas, querida —dijo la señora Bulstrode con voz melancólica y poniéndose en pie—. Has entregado tu afecto sin recibir nada a cambio.

—De ninguna manera, tía —dijo Rosamond con énfasis.

—Entonces, ¿estás segura de que el señor Lydgate siente por ti un afecto sincero?

Las mejillas de Rosamond ardían ya sin pausa y se sentía muy humillada. Optó por guardar silencio y su tía se fue aún más convencida de lo acertado de sus suposiciones.

En asuntos mundanos e indiferentes, el señor Bulstrode estaba dispuesto a hacer lo que su mujer le pedía y ella, sin explicarle sus razones, le encargó que se informara a la primera oportunidad de si el señor Lydgate tenía intención de casarse pronto. El resultado fue una decidida negativa. El señor Bulstrode, al pedírsele mayores precisiones, hizo ver que Lydgate había hablado como no lo haría un hombre que mantuviera unas relaciones que pudiesen desembocar en el matrimonio. La señora Bulstrode comprendió que tenía que cumplir con un serio deber y se las arregló para celebrar muy pronto un *tête-à-tête* con Lydgate, en el que la tía de Rosamond pasó de las preguntas sobre la salud de Fred Vincy, y de manifestar su sincera preocupación por la numerosa familia de su hermano, a las consideraciones generales sobre los peligros con que se enfrentan las personas jóvenes ante el problema de su sitio definitivo en la sociedad. Los muchachos eran a menudo alocados e irresponsables, sin tener en cuenta el dinero gastado en ellos, y una chica estaba expuesta a muchas vicisitudes que podían ser un obstáculo para sus esperanzas.

—Especialmente si es muy atractiva y sus padres reciben a muchas personas —dijo la señora Bulstrode —. Los caballeros le hacen cumplidos y la acaparan por el simple placer del momento y eso hace que otros se aparten. Creo que es una gran responsabilidad, señor Lydgate, poner obstáculos al futuro de una

muchacha. —Aquí la señora Bulstrode clavó los ojos en él, con un inconfundible propósito de advertencia, o tal vez de censura.

—Ciertamente —dijo Lydgate, mirándola también, quizá incluso hasta con un poco de fijeza—. Por otra parte, un hombre ha de ser un gran presumido para ir por el mundo con la idea de que no debe tener atenciones con una joven para que no se enamore de él o para que otros no piensen que debería hacerlo.

—Vamos, señor Lydgate, sabe usted bien las ventajas de que disfruta. Sabe que los jóvenes de Middlemarch no están en condiciones de competir con usted. El hecho de que frecuente una casa puede dificultar en gran medida que una muchacha se sitúe bien, impidiendo incluso que acepte las propuestas matrimoniales que le hagan otros.

A Lydgate le molestó más advertir la intención de la señora Bulstrode de lo que le halagó enterarse de sus ventajas sobre los romeos de Middlemarch. Ella, por su parte, tuvo la impresión de que había hablado con todo el empaque necesario y que el verbo «dificultar» había arrojado un noble manto sobre un conjunto de pormenores que quedaban de todas formas suficientemente claros.

Lydgate, sintiéndose un poco molesto, se echó el cabello para atrás con una mano, se palpó muy despacio el bolsillo del chaleco con la otra, y luego se agachó para llamar al diminuto perro de aguas, que tuvo el buen sentido de rechazar sus insinceras caricias. No hubiera estado bien marcharse, porque había cenado allí junto con otros huéspedes, y acababan de tomar el té. Pero la señora Bulstrode, segura de haber sido entendida, cambió de conversación.

Creo que los Proverbios de Salomón olvidaron decir que de la misma manera que a un paladar llagado todo se le vuelven granos de arena, a una conciencia intranquila todo lo que oye le parecen insinuaciones. Al día siguiente, el señor Farebrother, al separarse de Lydgate en la calle, dio por sentado que se verían más tarde en casa de los Vincy. Lydgate contestó secamente que no: tenía trabajo y debía renunciar a salir por las noches.

—¿Cómo? ¿Va usted a atarse al mástil y a taponarse los oídos? —dijo el vicario—. Bueno, si no desea que le seduzcan las sirenas, hace bien en tomar precauciones cuando aún está a tiempo.

Unos días antes, Lydgate hubiera considerado aquellas palabras tan solo como otro ejemplo del estilo característico del vicario. Ahora en cambio parecían contener una indirecta que confirmaba la impresión de que había estado haciendo el tonto y comportándose de una manera que podía interpretarse mal, aunque él no creyera que Rosamond hubiese hecho lo mismo. La señorita Vincy, estaba seguro, le daba a todo tan poca importancia como él, porque tenía un tacto y una intuición exquisitos en materia de comportamiento; pero las personas entre las que vivía eran gentes obtusas y entrometidas. De todas formas, el error no debía prolongarse. Lydgate decidió que solo iría a casa de los Vincy por razones profesionales, y empezó a cumplir su propósito a rajatabla.

Rosamond se sintió muy desgraciada. La intranquilidad que habían despertado las preguntas de su tía fue creciendo y creciendo hasta que al cabo de diez días de no haber visto a Lydgate se transformó en terror ante el vacío que podía llegar a producirse: en presagio del olvido, esa terrible esponja siempre a punto, que tan fácilmente absorbe las esperanzas de los mortales. El mundo tendría una nueva monotonía para ella, como un desierto que los conjuros de un mago hubieran convertido por muy poco tiempo en un jardín. Comprendió que comenzaba a sentir las punzadas del amor frustado y que ningún otro hombre podía ser ocasión de una construcción tan etérea y deliciosa como la que ella había edificado durante los últimos seis meses. La pobre Rosamond se sintió tan desdichada como Ariadna[81]; como una encantadora Ariadna teatral que se quedara atrás con todas sus maletas llenas de trajes y sin esperanza de una diligencia.

Hay en el mundo muchas mezclas maravillosas a las que se da por igual el nombre de amor y que reclaman los privilegios de una pasión sublime que sirve de excusa para todo (en la literatura y en el drama). Rosamond, por fortuna, no pensó en ningún acto desesperado: se peinó los rubios cabellos tan maravillosamente como siempre, y conservó una tranquilidad llena de orgullo. Su suposición más optimista era que su tía Harriet había intervenido de alguna manera para impedir las visitas de Lydgate: cualquier cosa antes que una espontánea indiferencia por parte del joven médico. Quien imagine que diez días es un período demasiado corto, no para incurrir en palidez, pérdida de peso u otros efectos mensurables de la pasión, sino para un circuito espiritual completo de conjeturas alarmadas y de desilusión, ignora todo lo que puede suceder en el ocio elegante de una juvenil cabeza femenina.

En el día undécimo, sin embargo, cuando Lydgate abandonaba Stone Court, la señora Vincy le pidió que comunicara a su marido que se había producido un pronunciado cambio en la salud del señor Featherstone, y que deseaba que fuese a verla aquel mismo día. Es cierto que Lydgate podía haber ido al almacén, o haber escrito una nota en una hoja de la agenda, dejándola en la puerta. Sin embargo, por lo que parece, estas estratagemas tan simples no llegaron a ocurrírsele, de lo cual podemos deducir que no tenía grandes

objeciones a presentarse en casa de los Vincy a una hora en que el alcalde se hallaba ausente y a dejarle el recado a su hija. Un hombre puede, por diversos motivos, renunciar a hacer la corte, pero quizá ni siquiera un sabio agradezca que nadie lo eche de menos. Intercambiar unas cuantas frases festivas con Rosamond sobre su resistencia a la disipación y su firme propósito de hacer largos ayunos incluso de sonidos dulces, sería una manera elegante y fácil de enlazar las antiguas costumbres con las nuevas. Hay que confesar, también, que reflexiones pasajeras sobre los posibles motivos para las insinuaciones de la señora Bulstrode habían conseguido, como sutiles cabellos adheridos, enredarse en el entramado más sólido de sus pensamientos.

La señorita Vincy estaba sola y se ruborizó tanto al entrar Lydgate que el joven médico sintió una turbación similar y, en lugar de hacer algún comentario humorístico, comenzó de inmediato a explicar el motivo de su visita y a pedirle a Rosamond, de forma casi ceremoniosa, que transmitiera el mensaje a su padre. La señorita Vincy, que en el primer momento creyó que renacía su felicidad, se sintió vivamente herida por el comportamiento de Lydgate; su rubor había desaparecido, y asintió fríamente, sin añadir ninguna palabra innecesaria, mientras una trivial labor de cadeneta que sostenía entre las manos le ahorraba la necesidad de mirar al médico por encima de la barbilla. En cualquier fracaso, el principio es sin duda la mitad del todo. Después de permanecer sentado durante un interminable momento jugueteando con la fusta, incapaz de decir nada, Lydgate se puso en pie para marcharse y Rosamond, nerviosa por la pugna entre la humillación y el deseo de no ponerla de manifiesto, soltó la labor de cadeneta como sorprendida, y también se levantó, de manera maquinal. Lydgate se agachó al instante para recogerla.

Al alzarse se encontró muy cerca de un rostro encantador que, sobre un esbelto cuello blanco, estaba acostumbrado a ver moviéndose de un lado para otro bajo el perfecto control de una elegancia muy segura de sí misma. Ahora, al levantar los ojos, vio un temblor de indefensión que le conmovió de manera completamente nueva y le hizo mirar a Rosamond con un espontáneo gesto de interrogación. En aquel momento la señorita Vincy era tan sincera como no lo había sido desde los cinco años: sintió que se le habían llenado los ojos de lágrimas y que tan solo cabía dejar que siguieran siendo agua sobre una flor azul o permitir que se deslizaran por sus mejillas, si era eso lo que querían.

Aquel momento de naturalidad fue el toque sutil que produjo la cristalización, transformando el flirteo en amor. Recuérdese que el hombre ambicioso que contemplaba aquellos nomeolvides bajo el agua era una persona afectuosa y de impulsos súbitos. No supo dónde iba a parar la cadeneta; una idea había tensado sus fibras más íntimas con efectos milagrosos, resucitando la fuerza de un amor apasionado que yacía no en un sepulcro sellado, sino tan solo cubierto por una envoltura muy ligera, fácilmente horadable. Sus palabras fueron muy bruscas y torpes; pero el tono hizo que sonaran como una ardiente confesión y súplica.

—¿Qué sucede? Se aflige usted. Dígame lo que le pasa… por favor.

A Rosamond nadie le había hablado nunca en aquel tono. No estoy segura de que reconociese las palabras; pero miró a Lydgate y las lágrimas se deslizaron por sus mejillas. No podía existir respuesta más completa que aquel silencio, y Lydgate, olvidando todo lo demás, totalmente dominado por un torrente de ternura ante la repentina convicción de que aquella joven y dulce criatura dependía de él para ser feliz, la rodeó con los brazos, envolviéndola delicada y protectoramente —estaba acostumbrado a ser delicado con los débiles y con los que sufrían—, y besó las lágrimas que le corrían por las mejillas. Era una extraña manera de llegar a un entendimiento, pero tuvo la ventaja de la brevedad. Rosamond no estaba enfadada, pero retrocedió un poco con gesto de tímida felicidad y Lydgate pudo sentarse cerca de ella y hablar de forma más coherente. Rosamond pasó a hacer su pequeña confesión y él prorrumpió en palabras de gratitud y de ternura con impulsiva prodigalidad. Al cabo de media hora abandonó la casa comprometido para casarse, con un alma que ya no era suya, sino de la mujer a la que se había ligado.

Lydgate volvió de nuevo por la noche para hablar con el señor Vincy, quien, recién llegado de Stone Court, estaba convencido de que no tardaría mucho en tener noticias de la desaparición de Featherstone. La adecuada palabra «desaparición», que tan oportunamente se le había ocurrido, mejoró su buen humor hasta superar incluso su habitual nivel vespertino. La palabra justa siempre es poder y comunica su precisión a nuestras acciones. Considerada como desaparición, la muerte del viejo Featherstone tomaba un aspecto puramente legal, de manera que el señor Vincy podía tamborilear sobre su caja de rapé y mostrarse jovial pensando en ella, sin tener siquiera que adoptar de cuando en cuando una expresión solemne; porque al señor Vincy le molestaban por igual la solemnidad y el fingimiento. ¿Quién se sentía jamás anonadado por un testador o cantaba un himno ante un título de propiedad de bienes raíces? Aquella noche el señor Vincy se inclinaba a tomar una actitud jovial ante todas las cosas: incluso hizo notar a Lydgate que Fred había heredado después de todo la constitución familiar y volvería muy pronto a ser un muchacho tan apuesto como siempre; y cuando se le pidió su aprobación para el noviazgo, la dio con sorprendente facilidad,

pasando de inmediato a hacer reflexiones generales sobre la conveniencia del matrimonio en la primera juventud y deduciendo al parecer de todo ello motivos suficientes para tomar un poco más de ponche.

Capítulo XXXII

Recibirán nuestras sugerencias como un gato lame leche.

SHAKESPEARE, *La tempestad*

La triunfal seguridad del alcalde, fundada en la insistencia del señor Featherstone en que Fred y su madre no se apartaran de su lado, era una emoción muy débil comparada con las que agitaban el pecho de los consanguíneos del anciano, que, como es lógico, manifestaban más su respeto por los lazos familiares y eran más visiblemente numerosos ahora que su pariente ya no se levantaba de la cama. Como es lógico: porque cuando «el pobre Peter» ocupaba su sillón en la sala con revestimiento de madera, ni las más pertinaces cucarachas para las que la cocinera prepara agua hirviendo podían haber sido peor recibidas, en un hogar que tenían razones para preferir, que aquellas personas cuya sangre del tronco Featherstone estaba mal alimentada no en razón de la tacañería, sino de la pobreza. El hermano Solomon y su hermana Jane eran ricos y no consideraban que la franqueza familiar y la total ausencia de falsa urbanidad con que siempre se los recibía fuesen razón suficiente para que su hermano, en el acto solemne de hacer testamento, pasara por alto los derechos superiores de la riqueza. Al menos el señor Featherstone no había sido tan inhumano como para prohibirles la entrada en su casa y no juzgaban excentricidad que hubiese mantenido alejados al hermano Jonah, a la hermana Martha y al resto, que no poseían ni la sombra de tales derechos. Conocían la máxima de Peter, según la cual el dinero era un huevo fresco y había que ponerlo en un nido tibio.

Pero el hermano Jonah, la hermana Martha y todos los exiliados menesterosos tenían un punto de vista distinto. Las probabilidades son tan variadas como los rostros que se ven en un adorno en relieve o en un papel pintado: todas las formas están allí, de Júpiter a Judy, si uno mira con inclinaciones creadoras. A los más pobres y menos favorecidos les parecía verosímil que, como Peter no había hecho nada por ellos en vida, los recordara en el último instante. Jonah sostenía que a los hombres les gusta dar sorpresas con el testamento, mientras Martha aseguraba que nadie tenía que sorprenderse si Peter dejaba la mayor parte de su dinero a los que menos lo esperaban. Y también era inevitable pensar que un hermano que estaba «allí tumbado», con las piernas hinchadas, acabaría por oír el clamor de la sangre, y que, aunque no alterase el testamento, bien podía tener dinero al alcance de la mano. En cualquier caso, algunos de sus consanguíneos debían estar en la casa vigilando a quienes apenas merecían el título de parientes. Todo el mundo conocía casos de testamentos falsos y de testamentos impugnados, que parecían tener la imprecisa pero conveniente ventaja de permitir de algún modo que los no legatarios viviesen de ellos. Además, podía sorprenderse a los no consanguíneos llevándose cosas… ¡y el pobre Peter «allí tumbado», indefenso! Alguien debía quedarse de guardia. En eso estaban completamente de acuerdo con Solomon y Jane; otros sobrinos, sobrinas y primos, discutiendo con mayor sutileza aún sobre qué podía hacer un hombre capaz de testar a lo loco y de administrarse grandes dosis de excentricidad, consideraban, sintiéndose por ello especialmente bondadosos, que existían unos intereses familiares que no debían descuidar y que les permitían visitar Stone Court con perfecto derecho. La hermana Martha, por otro nombre señora Cranch, que vivía en Chalky Flats y padecía un poco de asma, no se hallaba en condiciones de emprender el viaje; pero su hijo, por ser sobrino del pobre Peter, la representaría de manera ventajosa y estaría atento, no fuese que su tío Jonah hiciera uso indebido de las cosas improbables que parecía muy posible que ocurrieran. De hecho había un acuerdo general entre los consanguíneos Featherstone de que todo el mundo debía vigilar a todo el mundo y de que estaría bien que todos los demás reflexionaran sobre el hecho de que el Todopoderoso también los vigilaba.

Así que Stone Court veía de continuo a uno u otro de los consanguíneos llegando o marchándose, y sobre Mary Garth recaía la desagradable tarea de transmitir sus mensajes al señor Featherstone, que no quería ver a ninguno y que la enviaba al piso bajo con la misión aún más desagradable de comunicárselo. Como persona a cargo de la casa estaba obligada a rogarles, de acuerdo con los buenos modales provincianos, que se quedaran y comiesen; pero Mary decidió consultar a la señora Vincy sobre el aumento de mayor consumo de provisiones en el piso bajo ahora que el señor Featherstone no se levantaba de la cama.

—¡Ah, querida! Las cosas han de hacerse bien cuando se está muriendo un terrateniente. Dios sabe que yo no les escatimaría el jamón, aunque reservara las mejores piezas para el funeral. Ten siempre algo de ternera rellena y un buen queso partido. Hay que contar con que la casa esté abierta para todos en una ocasión como esta —dijo la generosa señora Vincy, que había recobrado ya sus trinos alegres y su plumaje de colores brillantes.

Algunos de los visitantes llegaron y no se marcharon después de ser generosamente obsequiados con ternera y jamón. El hermano Jonah, por ejemplo (en casi todas las familias hay personas así de desagradables; quizá incluso en la más encopetada aristocracia hay especímenes de Brobdingnag[82], gigantescamente en deuda y engordados con un costo todavía mayor), el hermano Jonah, como digo, por haber venido a menos en el mundo, se sustentaba sobre todo gracias a una ocupación de la que él, modestamente, no presumía, aunque era mejor que estafar en la Bolsa y en las carreras de caballos, pero que no exigía su presencia en Brassing mientras dispusiera de un buen rincón donde sentarse y de suficiente provisión de alimentos. En aquella ocasión eligió un ángulo de la cocina, en parte porque le gustaba más, y en parte porque no deseaba estar con Solomon, de quien tenía formada una sólida opinión fraternal. Sentado en un excelente sillón y con su mejor traje, siempre en presencia de buenos alimentos, el hermano Jonah tenía una agradable conciencia de estar en el centro de la acción, mezclada con pasajeras sensaciones dominicales y del bar en la posada El Hombre Verde; e hizo saber a Mary Garth que no se alejaría de Peter hasta que su pobre hermano estuviera bajo tierra. Los miembros molestos de una familia son normalmente los listos o los idiotas. Jonah era el ingenioso de los Featherstone y bromeaba con las criadas cuando se acercaban al fogón, pero parecía considerar a la señorita Garth un personaje sospechoso y la seguía con una mirada llena de frialdad.

Mary habría soportado aquel par de ojos sin gran desasosiego pero, por desgracia, estaba además el joven Cranch, quien, después de hacer todo el camino desde Chalky Flats para representar a su madre y vigilar a su tío Jonah, también consideró deber suyo quedarse en la cocina la mayor parte del tiempo, haciendo compañía a su tío. El joven Cranch no era exactamente el punto de equilibrio entre el ingenioso y el idiota: se inclinaba más bien hacia este último tipo, aderezado con un estrabismo que ponía en duda todos sus sentimientos, excepto que no eran demasiado intensos. Cuando Mary Garth entraba en la cocina y el señor Jonah Featherstone la seguía con sus fríos ojos de detective, el joven Cranch, volviendo la cabeza en la misma dirección, parecía insistir en que la muchacha se fijase en cómo bizqueaba, dando la impresión de hacerlo aposta, como los gitanos cuando Borrow[83] les leía el Nuevo Testamento. Aquello era demasiado para la pobre Mary; unas veces la ponía de mal humor y otras estaba a punto de hacerle perder la compostura. Un día que se le presentó la oportunidad, no resistió la tentación de describir a Fred la escena, y no fue posible impedir que el joven Vincy acudiera en seguida a presenciarla, so pretexto de que debía atravesar la cocina. Pero tan pronto como se enfrentó con los cuatro ojos tuvo que salir a toda prisa por la puerta más próxima, que resultó ser la que llevaba a la lechería, y allí, bajo techos muy altos y entre peroles, soltó una carcajada que resonó con fuerza y fue perfectamente audible en la cocina. Luego escapó por otra puerta, pero Jonah, que no había visto hasta entonces la tez blanca de Fred, sus largas piernas y sus delicadas y enjutas facciones, preparó toda una serie de sarcasmos en los que aquellos rasgos físicos quedaban ingeniosamente combinados con defectos de la peor especie.

—Vaya, Tom, tú no llevas unos pantalones tan elegantes, ni tienes unas piernas la mitad de largas y bien proporcionadas —dijo Jonah a su sobrino, guiñando un ojo al mismo tiempo, para dar a entender que en aquellas afirmaciones había algo más que su innegable veracidad. Tom se miró las piernas, pero no llegó a aclarar si prefería sus ventajas morales a una perversa longitud de extremidades y a una censurable elegancia en el pantalón.

En la gran sala había siempre varios pares de ojos al acecho y parientes ansiosos de quedarse en vela. Muchos llegaban, almorzaban y se iban, pero el hermano Solomon y la señora que había sido Jane Featherstone por espacio de veinticinco años antes de convertirse en la señora Waule creían conveniente quedarse allí todos los días durante horas, sin otra posible ocupación que observar a la astuta Mary Garth (de una astucia tan inaudita que no era posible sorprenderla en nada) y dar de cuando en cuando secas y

arrugadas señales de compunción —como si fueran capaces de producir torrentes en época más húmeda— porque no se les permitía entrar en la habitación de su hermano Peter. Y es que el desamor del anciano a su propia familia parecía crecer a medida que le resultaba más difícil divertirse mostrándose mordaz con ellos. Demasiado debilitado para clavar el aguijón, se encontraba con que el veneno le volvía a la sangre.

Desconfiando del mensaje que les había llegado por mediación de Mary Garth, los dos hermanos se presentaron en la puerta del dormitorio, ambos de negro —la señora Waule con un pañuelo blanco extendido en parte en la mano— y los dos con el rostro de color morado de alivio de luto; la señora Vincy, con las mejillas tan sonrosadas como las cintas ondeantes de su toca, administraba un cordial al anciano, y Fred, con la tez blanca y el cabello corto rizándosele ya como cabía esperar de un jugador inveterado, estaba cómodamente recostado en una amplia silla.

Al hacer su aparición aquellas fúnebres figuras, en claro desacato a sus órdenes, la indignación vino a fortalecer, con más éxito que el cordial, al señor Featherstone, que se hallaba incorporado a medias sobre la almohada, y siempre tenía al lado el bastón de puño dorado. En seguida procedió a empuñarlo, agitándolo hacia adelante y hacia atrás en el área más amplia que le fue posible, al parecer para ahuyentar a aquellos feos espectros, gritando con voz muy ronca:

—¡Atrás, atrás, señora Waule! ¡Atrás, Solomon!

—Hermano Peter… —empezó la señora Waule, pero Solomon la retuvo con una mano. Era un hombre de abultadas mejillas, próximo a los sesenta años, de ojos pequeños y furtivos, y no solo tenía un carácter mucho más dulce, sino que se creía mucho más profundo que su hermano Peter; de hecho, consideraba muy poco probable que le engañara ningún ser humano, por cuanto era imposible que fuesen más avariciosos y falsos de lo que él imaginaba. Incluso los poderes invisibles, en su opinión, podían llegar a aplacarse con un paréntesis de dulzura de vez en cuando… si venía de un propietario, que podría haber sido tan impío como otros.

—Hermano Peter —dijo, con tono contemporizador y, sin embargo, gravemente oficial—, es de justicia que te hable sobre Three Crofts y Manganese. El Todopoderoso conoce mis pensamientos…

—En ese caso sabe más de lo que yo deseo saber —dijo Peter, dejando el bastón con un gesto de tregua que encerraba también una amenaza, porque le dio la vuelta a fin de que el puño de oro pudiera utilizarse como porra en el caso de un enfrentamiento más directo, y miró fijamente la calva cabeza de Solomon.

—Hay cosas de las que quizá te arrepientas, hermano, por no haber hablado conmigo —dijo Solomon, sin atreverse a avanzar, de todas formas—. Podría hacerte compañía esta noche, y Jane también, con mucho gusto, y tú hablarías todo el tiempo que quisieras, o me dejarías hablar a mí.

—Sí; me tomaré el tiempo que necesite… No es preciso que me ofrezcas el tuyo —respondió Peter.

—Pero no puedes decidir por ti mismo la hora de la muerte, hermano —empezó la señora Waule, con su habitual voz algodonosa—. Y cuando hayas perdido el habla quizá te sientas cansado de tener extraños a tu alrededor y te acuerdes de mí y de mis hijos… —Pero aquí la voz se le quebró ante los conmovedores pensamientos que atribuía a su hermano privado de habla, ya que toda mención de nosotros mismos encierra lógicamente una carga afectiva.

—No, no lo haré —dijo el viejo Featherstone, con ánimo batallador—. No pensaré en ninguno de vosotros. He hecho testamento, ya os lo digo, he hecho testamento. —Al llegar aquí volvió la cabeza hacia la señora Vincy y tomó algo más del cordial.

—Algunas personas se avergonzarían de ocupar un sitio que pertenece por derecho a otros —dijo la señora Waule, volviendo sus ojos entrecerrados en la misma dirección.

—Bueno, hermana —dijo Solomon con irónica dulzura—, tú y yo no somos lo bastante elegantes, ni bien parecidos ni inteligentes: debemos mostrarnos humildes y permitir que las personas distinguidas se coloquen delante de nosotros.

Fred no pudo soportarlo más.

—¿Quiere que salgamos de la habitación mi madre y yo —dijo, poniéndose en pie y mirando al señor Featherstone—, para que hable usted a solas con sus parientes?

—Siéntate, haz lo que te digo —replicó el anciano con tono cortante—. Quédate donde estás. Adiós, Solomon —añadió, tratando de empuñar de nuevo el bastón, pero sin conseguirlo ahora que le había dado la vuelta—. Adiós, señora Waule. No vengáis más.

—Yo estaré abajo en cualquier caso —dijo Solomon—. Cumpliré con mi deber, y aún está por ver lo que el Todopoderoso permitirá.

—Sí, sobre propiedades que no deben salir de una familia —dijo la señora Waule, siguiendo en la misma línea— cuando hay jóvenes serios que pueden continuar la tarea. Me compadezco de los que no son así, y también de sus madres. Adiós, hermano Peter.

—Recuerda que soy el mayor después de ti, hermano, y que prosperé desde el primer momento, igual que hiciste tú, y que también tengo tierras con el apellido Featherstone —dijo Solomon, apoyándose mucho en aquella reflexión, considerando que podía resultar inspiradora durante las horas de vigilia nocturna—. Por ahora me despido de ti.

Su salida se aceleró al ver que el anciano se encasquetaba la peluca con las dos manos y cerraba los ojos con una mueca que le ensanchaba la boca, como si estuviera decidido a ser ciego y sordo.

Aquello no fue obstáculo para que hermano y hermana volvieran a diario a Stone Court y ocuparan el puesto que les marcaba el deber, a veces manteniendo un lento diálogo en voz baja, en el que entre comentario y respuesta pasaba tanto tiempo que cualquiera podría haber imaginado al oírlos que escuchaba a unos autómatas parlantes, si bien con algunas dudas sobre si el ingenioso mecanismo funcionaba de verdad o se daba cuerda durante un largo rato para luego atascarse y guardar silencio. Solomon y Jane habrían sentido mucho darse prisa: las consecuencias de tal actitud podían verse del otro lado de la pared, en la persona del hermano Jonah.

Sus horas de guardia en el salón se animaban a veces gracias a la presencia de otros huéspedes venidos de lejos o de cerca. Ahora que Peter Featherstone se hallaba en el piso alto, podía hablarse de sus propiedades aprovechando toda la sabiduría local al alcance de la mano: algunos vecinos de zonas rurales y también de Middlemarch se manifestaban de acuerdo con la familia del anciano y apoyaban sus intereses contra los Vincy, y las visitantes se conmovían incluso hasta las lágrimas, en conversación con la señora Waule, cuando rememoraban cómo también ellas se habían llevado algún que otro chasco por culpa de codicilos y matrimonios por despecho de desagradecidos caballeros de edad avanzada, a quienes, según era lógico suponer, la Providencia había mantenido en vida para que hicieran mejor uso de su riqueza. Tales conversaciones se interrumpían de manera brusca, como un órgano cuando se deja de atender el fuelle, si Mary Garth entraba en la habitación; y todos los ojos se volvían hacia ella como posible legataria, o como alguien que podría tener acceso a cofres de hierro.

Los jóvenes que eran parientes, o que tenían relación con la familia, estaban sin embargo dispuestos a admirarla, bajo aquella luz problemática, como una muchacha que mostraba gran compostura y que, entre todas las posibilidades todavía en el alero, podía resultar al menos uno de los premios de consolación. De aquí que recibiera su parte de cumplidos y de corteses atenciones.

Especialmente por parte del señor Borthrop Trumbull, soltero y subastador muy distinguido de aquella zona, que se interesaba mucho por la venta de tierras y de ganado: un hombre público, sin duda alguna, cuyo nombre aparecía en carteles ampliamente distribuidos y que podía con razón sentir lástima de quienes no le conocían. Era primo segundo de Peter Featherstone y había sido tratado por él de manera más amistosa que cualquier otro pariente, por serle útil en cuestiones de negocios; y en el programa de su funeral, que el mismo anciano había dictado, figuraba como uno de los encargados de llevar el féretro. No era una execrable codicia lo que albergaba el alma del señor Borthrop Trumbull, sino tan solo un sincero convencimiento de la importancia de sus propios méritos, que, era consciente de ello, podían volverse en contra de sus competidores en caso de rivalidad; de manera que si Peter Featherstone, que en lo que a él se refería, se había comportado siempre como el mejor de los hombres, tenía un buen recuerdo para él en su testamento, lo único que podría decir es que nunca le aduló ni le hizo insinuaciones de ninguna clase; se limitó a aconsejarlo de acuerdo con lo que su experiencia le dictaba, experiencia de más de veinte años desde la época de su aprendizaje a los quince, y que producía, como era lógico, conocimientos de indudable solidez. Su admiración no quedaba en absoluto limitada a sí mismo, ya que por razones tanto profesionales como privadas estaba acostumbrado a valorar las cosas muy por lo alto. Era un amante de las grandes frases y nunca usaba un lenguaje de poca calidad sin corregirse de inmediato, lo que era una suerte, porque hablaba bastante alto y le gustaba llevar la voz cantante, tanto de pie como muchas veces paseando, tirándose del chaleco con aires de ser un hombre muy seguro de sus propias opiniones, arreglándose rápidamente el pelo con el dedo índice y marcando cada nueva serie de aquellos movimientos con un activo despliegue de las sortijas de grandes dimensiones que adornaban sus manos. Había de cuando en cuando alguna vehemencia en sus modales, pero iba dirigida básicamente contra las falsas opiniones, tan extendidas por el mundo, y que con tanta frecuencia ponen a prueba la paciencia de un hombre con algunas lecturas y cierta experiencia. Estaba convencido de que en general la familia Featherstone era de inteligencia limitada, pero por ser hombre de mundo y personalidad pública, lo aceptaba todo con gran naturalidad, e incluso iba a conversar a la cocina con el señor Jonah y el joven Cranch, convencido de haber impresionado grandemente a este último con sus acertadas preguntas sobre Chalky Flats. Si alguien hubiese comentado que el señor Borthrop Trumbull, por ser subastador, estaba obligado a conocer a fondo todas las cosas, habría sonreído, alisándose el pelo en silencio, convencido de que, prácticamente, ese era el

caso. En conjunto, y de la manera en que puede serlo un subastador, el señor Trumbull era un hombre honorable, que no se avergonzaba de su ocupación, y estaba seguro de que si «el celebrado Peel, ahora sir Robert», le fuese presentado, no dejaría de reconocer su importancia.

—No me importaría tomar una loncha de ese jamón y un vaso de esa cerveza, señorita Garth, si usted me lo permite —dijo, entrando en el salón a las once y media, después de haber disfrutado del excepcional privilegio de ver al viejo Featherstone, y situándose de espaldas al fuego entre la señora Waule y Solomon —. No es necesario que salga usted; déjeme tocar la campanilla.

—Muchas gracias —dijo Mary—, pero tengo cosas que hacer en la cocina.

—Bien, señor Trumbull, disfruta usted de grandes privilegios —dijo la señora Waule.

—¿Se refiere usted a ver al anciano? —respondió el subastador, jugueteando imparcialmente con sus sortijas—. Comprenda que se ha apoyado bastante en mí. —Aquí apretó los labios y frunció las cejas en actitud meditativa.

—¿Podría alguien preguntar qué es lo que nuestro hermano ha estado diciendo? —intervino Solomon, en un suave tono de voz, lleno de humildad, lo que le proporcionaba un grato sentimiento de su propia astucia, ya que era un hombre rico y no tenía por qué usarlo.

—Sí, sí, claro, cualquiera puede preguntar —dijo el señor Trumbull, con voz sonora y acento jovial pero lleno de sarcasmo—. Cualquiera puede interrogar. Cualquier persona puede dar a sus observaciones una inflexión interrogativa —continuó el subastador, alzando la voz en consonancia con la progresiva elevación de su estilo—. Es algo que los buenos oradores hacen constantemente, incluso cuando no esperan ninguna respuesta. Es lo que llamamos una figura de dicción: hacer buena figura al hablar, que podría decirse. —El elocuente subastador sonrió ante su propio ingenio.

—No me desagradaría saber que mi hermano se propone acordarse de usted, señor Trumbull —dijo Solomon—. Nunca he estado en contra de las personas con mérito. Solo estoy en contra de las indignas.

—Ahí está la cuestión, ¿ve usted?, precisamente ahí —dijo el señor Trumbull, con gesto expresivo—. No se puede negar que personas indignas han sido legatarias, e incluso herederas universales. Eso es lo que sucede con las disposiciones testamentarias. —Apretó de nuevo los labios y frunció un poco las cejas.

—¿Está usted dando como cosa segura, señor Trumbull, que mi hermano ha dejado sus tierras a personas ajenas a nuestra familia? —dijo la señora Waule, sobre quien, dado su pesimismo, aquellos términos legales habían tenido un efecto deprimente.

—Dejar las tierras a ciertas personas es como cederlas a una institución caritativa —comentó Solomon, al ver que la pregunta de su hermana quedaba sin respuesta.

—¿Tierras para obras de caridad? —intervino de nuevo la señora Waule—. Estoy segura de que no quiere usted decir una cosa así, señor Trumbull. Eso sería tentar al Todopoderoso, que hizo de mi hermano un hombre próspero.

Mientras la señora Waule hablaba, el señor Borthrop Trumbull se encaminó hacia la ventana, recorriendo con el dedo índice el interior de su alzacuello, a continuación las patillas y luego las ondas del pelo. Después se acercó a la mesa de trabajo de la señorita Garth, abrió un libro y leyó el título en voz alta, con la misma entonación pomposa que utilizaría si estuviera a punto de subastarlo:

—*Anne de Geierstein* (pronunciado Yirstín), *o la doncella de la niebla*, «por el autor de *Waverley*». —Luego, pasando la página, empezó sonoramente—: «Casi han transcurrido ya cuatro siglos desde que la serie de acontecimientos que se relatan en los siguientes capítulos tuvieron lugar en el Continente». —El señor Trumbull pronunció aquella última palabra, verdaderamente admirable, convirtiéndola en esdrújula y dándose cuenta de que era un uso incorrecto, pero convencido de que con aquel cambio quedaba realzada la sonora belleza que su manera de leer había conferido al conjunto.

Y en aquel instante entró la criada con la bandeja, de manera que los momentos en que habría sido posible contestar a la pregunta de la señora Waule quedaron atrás sin el menor contratiempo, mientras ella y Solomon, observando los movimientos del señor Trumbull, pensaban que tener muchos conocimientos era un lamentable obstáculo para ocuparse de asuntos de la mayor trascendencia. El señor Borthrop Trumbull no sabía en realidad nada del testamento del viejo Featherstone; pero difícilmente habría nadie logrado que declarara su ignorancia en ninguna cuestión a menos que se le arrestase por encubrir una conjura.

—No tomaré más que un bocado de jamón y un vaso de cerveza —dijo, con entonación tranquilizadora —. Por mi condición de hombre ocupado en asuntos públicos, tomo un tentempié cuando puedo. Afirmaría la superioridad de este jamón —añadió, después de engullir varios bocados con alarmante rapidez— sobre cualquier otro de los tres reinos. En mi opinión, es mejor que los jamones de Freshitt Hall… y creo que soy un juez aceptable.

—A algunos no les gusta que sus jamones tengan tanto azúcar —dijo la señora Waule—. Pero mi pobre

hermano siempre les ha puesto mucho azúcar.

—Si una persona quiere algo mejor, está en su derecho; ¡alabado sea Dios, qué aroma! Me gustaría comprarlos siempre de esta calidad, de eso estoy seguro. Supone una satisfacción para un caballero —aquí la voz del señor Trumbull se convirtió en vehículo de un sentido reproche— servir en su mesa este jamón.

Empujó el plato a un lado, se sirvió cerveza en el vaso y adelantó un poco la silla, aprovechando la ocasión para mirarse el lado interno de las piernas, que procedió a acariciar con satisfacción, ya que el señor Trumbull utilizaba todos esos gestos y ademanes no demasiado frívolos que distinguen a las razas dominantes del norte.

—Veo que tiene usted aquí una obra muy interesante, señorita Garth —hizo notar, cuando Mary reapareció—. Es del autor de *Waverley*, es decir, de sir Walter Scott. Yo mismo he comprado una de sus obras: un libro que está muy bien, una publicación de gran categoría, titulada *Ivanhoe*. No le será fácil encontrar un escritor que lo venza, creo yo; en mi opinión, tardará en aparecer alguien que lo sobrepase. Acabo de leer un fragmento del principio de *Anne de Yirstín*. Comienza bien. —Las cosas nunca empezaban para el señor Borthrop Trumbull: siempre comenzaban, tanto en la vida privada como en las octavillas que anunciaban sus subastas—. Veo que es usted una persona que lee. ¿Está suscrita a nuestra biblioteca de Middlemarch?

—No —dijo Mary—. Ese libro me lo trajo el señor Fred Vincy.

—Yo soy un gran aficionado a los libros —replicó el señor Trumbull—. Tengo por lo menos doscientos encuadernados en piel y me complazco en pensar que están bien elegidos. También poseo cuadros de Murillo, Rubens, Teniers, Tiziano, Van Dyck y otros. Me complacería mucho prestarle cualquier obra que usted sugiriera, señorita Garth.

—Se lo agradezco mucho —dijo Mary, apresurándose de nuevo a abandonar la habitación—, pero tengo muy poco tiempo para leer.

—Supongo que mi hermano le habrá dejado algo en el testamento —dijo Solomon, hablando en voz muy baja, una vez que la muchacha hubo cerrado la puerta a sus espaldas, indicando con un gesto de cabeza a la ausente Mary.

—Su primera esposa fue muy mal partido para él, de todas formas —dijo la señora Waule—. No aportó nada al matrimonio y esta joven no es más que su sobrina. Y muy orgullosa. Además, mi hermano siempre le ha pagado un sueldo.

—Sin embargo es una chica muy razonable, en mi opinión —dijo el señor Trumbull, terminando la cerveza y poniéndose en pie con un enérgico reajuste del chaleco—. La he observado cuando mezclaba gotas medicinales. Es una muchacha que está en lo que hace, señor mío. Eso es una gran virtud en una mujer y una gran ventaja para nuestro amigo del piso de arriba, pobrecillo. Un hombre cuya vida tiene algún valor debe pensar en su esposa como enfermera: eso es lo que yo haría si me casara; y creo que he vivido soltero el tiempo suficiente para no cometer una equivocación en ese sentido. Algunos hombres deben casarse para elevarse un poco pero, cuando tenga necesidad de eso, confío en que haya alguien que me lo diga… Espero que alguna persona concreta haga que me percate de ese hecho. Le deseo muy buenos días, señora Waule. Buenos días, señor Solomon. Confío en que volvamos a encontrarnos en circunstancias menos melancólicas.

Cuando el señor Trumbull se hubo marchado después de hacer una elegante inclinación de cabeza, Solomon, inclinándose hacia adelante, hizo notar a su hermana:

—Puedes estar segura, Jane, de que mi hermano le ha dejado a esa chica una buena suma.

—Cualquiera lo pensaría así, por la manera de hablar del señor Trumbull —dijo Jane. Luego, después de una pausa—: Habla como si no hubiera que fiarse de mis hijas para dar unas gotas.

—Los subastadores dicen cosas muy raras —respondió Solomon—. Aunque es cierto que Trumbull ha hecho dinero.

Capítulo XXXIII

Cerradle los ojos y corred las cortinas;
y meditemos todos.

Enrique VI, 2.ª parte

Aquella noche, después de las doce, Mary Garth tomó el relevo en la habitación del señor Featherstone y se quedó a solas con él las primeras horas de la madrugada. A menudo elegía aquella tarea, en la que hallaba cierto placer, a pesar de los malos modos del anciano cuando solicitaba sus cuidados. Pero había pausas durante las que se quedaba completamente inmóvil en la silla, disfrutando de la quietud exterior y de la media luz. El fuego de la chimenea, con sus suaves movimientos perfectamente audibles, parecía algo así como una solemne existencia llena de calma e independiente de las mezquinas pasiones, de los deseos estúpidos, del esforzarse tras las cosas inciertas sin el menor valor que suscitaban diariamente su desprecio. A Mary le gustaban sus propios pensamientos y podía pasarlo muy bien sentada en la penumbra con las manos en el regazo; porque, al tener desde muy temprana edad razones sólidas para creer en la imposibilidad práctica de que las cosas se arreglaran para su satisfacción personal, malgastaba muy poco tiempo asombrándose y enfadándose por ello. De manera que había llegado ya a considerar la vida como algo muy parecido a una comedia en la que ella había tomado la altiva resolución, más aún, la generosa resolución, de no desempeñar un papel ruin ni traicionero. Mary podría haberse convertido en una persona cínica de no haber sido por unos padres a los que respetaba y por un depósito interior de afectuosa gratitud que era aún más valioso porque había aprendido a no desear cosas poco razonables.

Aquella noche daba vueltas, como tenía por costumbre, a las escenas del día, y sus labios se curvaban con frecuencia en un gesto divertido por las rarezas a las que su imaginación añadía nuevos toques grotescos; la gente resultaba muy ridícula con sus ilusiones a cuestas, llevando el gorro del bufón sin notarlo, convencida de que sus mentiras eran impenetrables y encontrando al mismo tiempo transparentes las de todos los demás, considerándose a sí mismos excepciones en todos los casos, como si, cuando todo el mundo se volvía amarillo bajo la luz de una lámpara, solo ellos continuaran teniendo la tez rosada. Había, sin embargo, ciertas alusiones que a Mary no le parecían del todo cómicas. Se hallaba secretamente convencida, aunque no tuviera otro motivo que su asidua observación del carácter del viejo Featherstone, de que, pese a lo mucho que le gustaba tener a su lado a los Vincy, era tan capaz de prescindir de ellos en su testamento como de cualquiera de los parientes a los que mantenía a distancia. Mary sentía considerable desdén por la evidente alarma de la señora Vincy ante la posibilidad de que Fred y ella pudieran quedarse a solas, pero eso no le impedía considerar con inquietud cuál sería la actitud de Fred, si al final su tío lo dejaba tan pobre como antes. La señorita Garth hacía de Fred el blanco de sus burlas cuando lo tenía delante, pero no disfrutaba con sus insensateces cuando estaba ausente.

Sin embargo, a Mary le gustaban sus pensamientos: una mente joven y vigorosa, y no desequilibrada por la pasión, encuentra provecho en conocer la vida y contempla sus propias facultades con interés. Mary tenía abundante alegría interior.

Sus meditaciones no se veían coloreadas por ninguna solemnidad o patetismo relacionados con el anciano enfermo; es más fácil fingir que sentir tales emociones por una criatura de edad avanzada cuya vida no es, a primera vista, más que el residuo de unos vicios. Mary había padecido siempre el lado más desagradable del señor Featherstone: el anciano no estaba orgulloso de ella y tan solo le resultaba útil.

Preocuparse por un alma que está siempre dándonos tarascadas hay que dejarlo para los santos de la tierra, y Mary no era uno de ellos. Nunca le había contestado con brusquedad y le atendía fielmente: era lo más que podía dar de sí. Featherstone, por su parte, no se preocupaba lo más mínimo por su alma y se había negado a ver al señor Tucker para tratar de ello.

Aquella noche no había dado ninguna tarascada y durante la primera o las dos primeras horas estuvo más quieto de lo normal, hasta que finalmente Mary le oyó golpear con el manojo de llaves la pequeña caja metálica que siempre guardaba en la cama al alcance de la mano. Hacia las tres de la madrugada le oyó decir, con notable claridad:

—¡Ven aquí, muchacha!

Mary obedeció y se encontró con que el anciano ya había sacado la caja metálica de debajo de las sábanas, aunque habitualmente pedía que alguien lo hiciera en su lugar; también había encontrado la llave. Acto seguido abrió el cofrecillo y, sacando de él otra llave, miró fijamente a su sobrina con ojos que parecían haber recobrado toda su viveza y dijo:

—¿Cuántos se han quedado en casa?

—¿Pregunta usted por sus parientes? —dijo Mary, muy acostumbrada a la manera de hablar del anciano, que hizo un leve gesto de asentimiento—. El señor Jonah Featherstone —continuó la muchacha— y el joven Cranch duermen aquí.

—Así que perseveran, ¿no es eso? Y los demás… vienen todos los días, estoy seguro… ¿Solomon y Jane y los más jóvenes? ¿Vienen a husmear y a contar y a hacer sus cálculos?

—No vienen diariamente, excepto el señor Solomon y la señora Waule; los demás aparecen con frecuencia.

El anciano escuchó a Mary haciendo una mueca y luego dijo, ablandando la expresión:

—Estúpidos que son. Presta atención, muchacha. Son las tres de la madrugada y estoy tan en mi sano juicio como haya podido estarlo en los mejores años de mi vida. Conozco mis propiedades y dónde está invertido el dinero y todo lo demás. Y lo he dejado todo preparado para cambiar de idea y hacer lo que me apetezca en el último momento. ¿Me oyes, muchacha? Estoy en mi sano juicio.

—¿Y qué es lo que quiere? —preguntó Mary con mucha calma.

El anciano bajó la voz con expresión de gran astucia.

—He hecho dos testamentos y voy a quemar uno. Ahora tienes que seguir mis instrucciones. Esta es la llave de mi cofre de hierro, que está ahí en el armario. Empuja con fuerza hacia un lado la plancha de bronce que hay arriba hasta que se abra como una falleba: entonces ya puedes meter la llave en la cerradura y hacerla girar. Hazlo como te he dicho y saca el papel que está encima de todo… Última Voluntad y Testamento… con letras de imprenta muy grandes.

—No —dijo Mary con voz firme—; eso no lo puedo hacer.

—¿No quieres hacerlo? Te aseguro que tienes que hacerlo —dijo el anciano, al que empezó a temblar la voz, sorprendido ante aquella resistencia.

—No tocaré ni su cofre de hierro ni su testamento. Debo negarme a hacer cualquier cosa que pueda despertar sospechas sobre mi conducta.

—Te digo que estoy en mi sano juicio. ¿Es que no voy a poder hacer lo que quiera al final? Hice dos testamentos a propósito. Coge la llave, vamos.

—No, no lo haré —dijo Mary, aún más resuelta. Su repugnancia era cada vez mayor.

—Te digo que no hay tiempo que perder.

—Eso no está en mi mano evitarlo. No permitiré que el final de su vida manche el comienzo de la mía. No voy a tocar ni su cofre de hierro ni su testamento. —Mary se apartó un poco del lado de la cama.

El anciano se quedó un momento inmóvil con una mirada sin expresión, con la llave ofrecida aún en alto; luego con un brusco movimiento lleno de agitación empezó a vaciar con su huesuda mano izquierda la caja metálica que tenía delante.

—Chiquilla —empezó a decir, precipitadamente—, ¡mira aquí! Coge el dinero… los billetes y el oro… mira, cógelo… será todo para ti… pero haz lo que te digo.

Trató de extender lo más posible el brazo con la llave en dirección a Mary, pero la muchacha volvió a retroceder.

—No tocaré ni la llave ni el dinero. Por favor, no me pida otra vez que lo haga. Si insiste, tendré que llamar a su hermano.

El anciano dejó caer el brazo y por primera vez en su vida Mary vio a Peter Featherstone llorar como un niño.

—Por favor, guarde el dinero —dijo la muchacha con el tono más amable que pudo; luego volvió a su

sitio junto al fuego, esperando que aquello sirviera para convencerlo de que era inútil decir nada más. Pero el anciano se repuso en seguida y dijo anhelante:

—Escúchame entonces. Llama a ese chico joven. Llama a Fred Vincy.

El corazón de Mary empezó a latir con precipitación. Se le ocurrieron diferentes ideas sobre lo que supondría la quema de un segundo testamento. Tuvo que tomar una difícil decisión a toda prisa.

—Le llamaré si me deja usted llamar también al señor Jonah y a otras personas.

—Te digo que solo a él. Al chico joven. Haré lo que me apetezca.

—Espere a que sea de día, cuando todo el mundo esté levantado. O déjeme llamar a Simmons ahora mismo, para que vaya a buscar al abogado. Puede estar de vuelta en menos de dos horas.

—¿Abogado? ¿Para qué quiero yo un abogado? No lo sabrá nadie… Te digo que no tiene que saberlo nadie. Haré lo que quiera.

—Déjeme que llame a alguna otra persona —dijo Mary con tono persuasivo. No le gustaba su situación; no le gustaba estar a solas con Featherstone cuando el anciano tenía aquella extraña explosión de energía nerviosa que le permitía hablar una y otra vez sin caer en su tos habitual, aunque, de todos modos, no deseaba insistir innecesariamente en una negativa que tanto le agitaba—. Por favor, déjeme llamar a alguien.

—Te digo que no quiero a nadie. Vamos, chiquilla. Coge el dinero. Nunca volverás a tener otra oportunidad. Son casi doscientas libras… Hay más en la caja y nadie sabe la cantidad exacta. Cógelo y haz lo que te digo.

Mary, de pie junto al fuego, vio la luz de las llamas iluminando al anciano, recostado contra la almohada, con la mano huesuda ofreciendo la llave, y el dinero delante de él sobre la colcha. Nunca olvidó aquella visión de un hombre que quería hacer su voluntad hasta el último momento. Pero la manera en que le había ofrecido el dinero la obligó a hablar con más resolución que nunca.

—No se esfuerce, tío. No lo haré. Guarde su dinero. No tengo intención de tocarlo. Haré cualquier otra cosa que me sea posible para aliviarle; pero no voy a tocar ni sus llaves ni su dinero.

—¡Cualquier otra cosa… cualquier otra cosa! —dijo el viejo Featherstone, con voz ronca por la cólera y que, al igual que en una pesadilla, quería ser muy alta pero apenas se oía—. No quiero ninguna otra cosa. Acércate… ven aquí.

Mary avanzó hacia él con precaución: lo conocía demasiado bien. Vio cómo soltaba las llaves y trataba de empuñar el bastón, mientras la miraba como una hiena decrépita, los músculos de la cara deformados por el esfuerzo de la mano. La muchacha se detuvo a una distancia prudente.

—Déjeme que le dé un cordial —dijo calmosamente— y procure tranquilizarse. Quizá consiga dormir. Y mañana cuando sea de día podrá usted hacer lo que quiera.

El anciano levantó el bastón, a pesar de que la muchacha se hallaba fuera de su alcance y lo arrojó con un esfuerzo violento que no era sino impotencia. El bastón cayó resbalando por el pie de la cama. Mary lo dejó en el suelo y regresó a su silla junto a la chimenea. Más adelante se acercaría de nuevo al anciano con un cordial, al que la fatiga le haría mostrarse pasivo. Estaba ya muy cerca el momento más frío de la madrugada, el fuego era muy débil y Mary, por una rendija entre las cortinas de muaré, veía la luz, descolorida por la persiana de hule. Después de añadir un poco de leña al fuego y de echarse un chal sobre los hombros, la muchacha se sentó, confiando en que el señor Featherstone pudiera dormirse ya. Si se acercaba a él quizá persistiera en su irritación. No había dicho nada después de arrojar el bastón, pero ella le había visto coger las llaves de nuevo y poner la mano derecha sobre el dinero. No llegó a guardarlo, sin embargo, y Mary supuso que se estaba quedando dormido.

Muy pronto el recuerdo de lo que acababa de pasar le produjo más inquietud de la que experimentó durante la escena misma y la llevó a interrogarse sobre aquellos actos suyos tan decididos que habían excluido en el momento crítico cualquier posibilidad de duda.

Poco después la leña seca lanzó una llamarada que iluminó todos los rincones y Mary vio que el anciano descansaba plácidamente con la cabeza un poco vuelta hacia un lado. Se acercó a él sin hacer el menor ruido y le pareció que su rostro tenía una extraña inmovilidad; pero un instante después las llamas, al comunicar su movimiento a todos los objetos, la llenaron de incertidumbre. Los violentos latidos de su corazón volvían tan dudosas sus percepciones que incluso después de tocarlo y de tratar de oír su respiración seguía sin poder fiarse de sus conclusiones. De manera que se acercó a la ventana y corrió suavemente las cortinas y la persiana de hule, para que la tranquila luz del cielo cayera sobre la cama.

Un momento después Mary corrió hacia la campanilla y llamó enérgicamente. Al cabo de muy poco tiempo no había ya ninguna duda de que Peter Featherstone estaba muerto, con las llaves en la mano derecha y la izquierda encima de un montón de billetes de banco y de monedas de oro.

Libro cuarto

Tres problemas de amor

Capítulo XXXIV

PRIMER CABALLERO: Hombres así son plumas, astillas y pajas,
no tienen peso ni fuerza.
SEGUNDO CABALLERO: Pero la ligereza
también es causa, y sumada, nos da peso.
Porque el poder encuentra su sitio en la ausencia de poder;
todo avance es una cesión, y el barco que navega
podría encallar si los pensamientos del
timonel carecieran de fuerza para equilibrar los contrarios.

Peter Featherstone fue enterrado una mañana de mayo. En los prosaicos alrededores de Middlemarch, mayo no era siempre un mes soleado y tibio y aquel día un viento frío arrastraba los capullos de los jardines colindantes hasta los verdes montículos del cementerio de Lowick. Solo de vez en cuando nubes que se movían a gran velocidad permitían que un rayo de sol iluminara cualquier objeto, feo o hermoso, que se hallase dentro de su lluvia dorada. En el cementerio los objetos eran muy variados, porque había una pequeña multitud rural esperando para ver la ceremonia. Había corrido la noticia de que iba a ser un «gran entierro»; el anciano caballero había dejado instrucciones escritas acerca de todo, y quería tener un funeral «mejor que el de otras personas más distinguidas». Y era cierto; porque el viejo Featherstone no había sido un Harpagón[84] con otras pasiones enteramente devoradas por la siempre flaca y siempre hambrienta del ahorro, ni trató nunca de conseguir de antemano un descuento del empresario de pompas fúnebres. Amaba el dinero, pero también le gustaba gastarlo para satisfacer sus peculiares inclinaciones y quizá lo amaba sobre todo como medio para, de manera más o menos molesta, hacer sentir a otros su poder. Si alguien quiere defender aquí que el viejo Featherstone poseía sin duda rasgos de bondad, no seré yo quien se atreva a negarlo; pero he de observar que la bondad es modesta por naturaleza, se desanima con facilidad y, si en los primeros años de la vida se ve muy zarandeada por vicios descarados, es probable que lleve una existencia muy recluida; de este modo, creen más fácilmente en ella quienes se imaginan de manera teórica a un anciano caballero egoísta que quienes se forman una opinión más concreta, basada en sus relaciones personales con él. De todas formas, el señor Featherstone había decidido tener un espléndido funeral e «invitar» a personas que hubieran preferido quedarse en casa. El anciano mostró incluso el deseo de que sus parientes del sexo femenino lo acompañaran a su última morada y la pobre hermana Martha tuvo que emprender un difícil viaje desde Chalky Flats con tal fin. Ella y Jane se habrían sentido plenamente satisfechas (aunque lo manifestaran con gran profusión de lágrimas) por esta indicación de que un hermano a quien no le gustaba verlas cuando estaba vivo hubiese deseado anticipadamente su presencia en el momento de convertirse en testador, si el gesto no hubiera resultado equívoco al extenderse a la señora Vincy, cuyo gasto en bellos crespones parecía implicar unas esperanzas más presuntuosas, especialmente molestas al ir acompañadas por una lozanía de piel que delataba con gran claridad hasta qué punto la madre de Fred no era una consanguínea, sino que pertenecía a la especie, en general reprensible, de los parientes políticos.

Todos somos imaginativos de una forma u otra, porque las imágenes son las hijas del deseo; y el pobre Peter Featherstone, que se reía mucho de cómo otros se dedicaban a la autocomplacencia, no logró escapar a la hermandad en la ilusión. Al redactar el programa para su entierro no se percató de que el placer que le producía el pequeño drama del que formaba parte era tan solo de carácter anticipatorio. Al reír entre dientes por los trastornos que podía causar con la férrea presión de su mano sin vida, mezclaba

inevitablemente sus percepciones del momento con otra presencia tan lívida como inmóvil, con lo que su preocupación por una vida futura se centraba más bien en las satisfacciones que pudiera experimentar dentro del ataúd. Cabe por tanto decir que también el viejo Featherstone, a su manera, era un hombre con imaginación.

Fuera como fuese, lo cierto es que las tres carrozas de duelo fueron ocupadas de acuerdo con las órdenes escritas del fallecido. Quienes, montados a caballo, acompañaban al féretro, llevaban lujosos crespones sobre los hombros y en el sombrero, e incluso sus ayudantes lucían insignias de duelo de excelente calidad. La negra procesión, al apearse de vehículos y monturas, dio la sensación de ser aún más numerosa gracias a la pequeñez del cementerio. La gravedad de los rostros y las negras colgaduras estremecidas por el viento parecían hablar de un mundo extrañamente en desacuerdo con los pétalos que caían blandamente de los árboles en flor y con el centelleo del sol sobre las margaritas. El clérigo que recibió a la procesión fue el señor Cadwallader: también de acuerdo con los deseos de Peter Featherstone, movido, como de costumbre, por razones peculiares. Su desprecio por los vicarios, a los que siempre llamaba subalternos, exigía que lo enterrara un clérigo beneficiado. En el señor Casaubon no había ni que pensar, no solo porque declinaba ocuparse de aquellas tareas, sino porque Featherstone sentía hacia él especial antipatía por ser rector de su parroquia y tener un derecho sobre la tierra en forma de diezmo, así como por predicar sermones matinales, que el anciano, por hallarse en su banco de la iglesia y sin deseos de dormir, se había visto obligado a escuchar refunfuñando en su interior. Estaba en contra de cualquier párroco que le predicara desde un púlpito. En cambio, sus relaciones con el señor Cadwallader habían sido muy distintas: el río truchero que atravesaba las tierras del señor Casaubon recorría también las de Featherstone, de manera que Cadwallader era un párroco que tenía que pedir favores en lugar de predicar. Además, aunque miembro de la clase alta, vivía a seis kilómetros de Lowick y quedaba, por tanto, entronizado en el mismo cielo que el primer magistrado del condado y otros dignatarios a los que se consideraba vagamente necesarios para el funcionamiento general de la sociedad. Sería por tanto una satisfacción para Featherstone que lo enterrara el señor Cadwallader, cuyo nombre mismo ofrecía también una excelente oportunidad para pronunciarlo mal si uno así lo deseaba.

La distinción otorgada al rector de Tipton y Freshitt era el motivo de que la señora Cadwallader formase parte del grupo que contemplaba el funeral desde una de las ventanas superiores de la casa solariega. A ella no le gustaba visitar aquella mansión, pero le atraía, y así lo dijo, ver un grupo de animales tan extraños como los que allí se reunirían con motivo del funeral; y así persuadió a sir James y a la joven lady Chettam para que fueran con el rector y con ella a Lowick y que así la visita fuera más amena.

—Iré con usted a cualquier sitio, señora Cadwallader —había dicho Celia—, aunque no me gustan los funerales.

—Querida mía, cuando se tiene un clérigo en la familia hay que amoldarse a las circunstancias: es algo que yo hice desde muy pronto. Cuando me casé con Humphrey decidí aficionarme a los sermones y empecé disfrutando mucho con el final. Muy pronto amplié el placer a la parte central y luego al principio, porque era necesario para llegar al final.

—No; estoy segura de que no fue así —dijo la madre de sir James con majestuosa convicción.

La ventana del piso alto, que era un excelente observatorio para contemplar el funeral, se hallaba en la habitación que había ocupado el señor Casaubon cuando se le prohibió trabajar; pero el marido de Dorothea había reanudado ya casi por completo su habitual estilo de vida a pesar de advertencias y prescripciones y, después de dar cortésmente la bienvenida a la señora Cadwallader, se refugió de nuevo en la biblioteca para rumiar un conjunto de errores eruditos sobre Kus y Misraím.

De no haber sido por sus visitantes, también Dorothea podría haber estado encerrada en la biblioteca, sin presenciar el funeral del viejo Featherstone, ceremonia que, a pesar de lo alejada que parecía del tenor de su vida, siempre reaparecería ante ella en años posteriores por el simple roce de ciertos puntos sensibles de la memoria, de la misma manera que la visión de la basílica de San Pedro en Roma se hallaba entrelazada con estados de ánimo melancólicos. Escenas que significan cambios vitales para el destino de nuestros vecinos no son más que el paisaje de fondo de los nuestros y, sin embargo, como una imagen concreta de campos y árboles, llegamos a asociarlas con épocas de nuestra propia historia y forman parte de esa unidad vinculada a la selección de nuestras vivencias más intensas.

La asociación, como en sueños, de un algo extraño y apenas entendido con los secretos más profundos de su experiencia, parecía ser un reflejo del sentimiento de soledad que surgía del mismo carácter apasionado de Dorothea. La alta burguesía rural de otros tiempos respiraba una atmósfera social enrarecida: desperdigados por la cumbre de la montaña miraban hacia abajo distinguiendo de manera muy imperfecta los núcleos de mayor densidad de vida que se agrupaban en las zonas inferiores. Y Dorothea no se sentía a

gusto con la perspectiva y la frialdad de aquellas alturas.

—No voy a seguir mirando —dijo Celia, después de que la comitiva entrara en la iglesia, colocándose un poco detrás del codo de su marido, a fin de poder tocar disimuladamente su chaqueta con la mejilla—. Supongo que a Dodo le gusta: le encantan las cosas melancólicas y las personas feas.

—Me gusta saber algo de las personas entre las que vivo —dijo Dorothea, que había estado contemplándolo todo con el interés de un monje en viaje de vacaciones—. Me parece que no sabemos nada de nuestros vecinos, a excepción de los arrendatarios. Siempre me estoy preguntando qué clase de vida llevan otras personas y cómo se toman las cosas. Le estoy muy agradecida a la señora Cadwallader por venir a sacarme de la biblioteca.

—Haces muy bien en agradecérmelo —dijo la señora Cadwallader—. Los granjeros ricos de Lowick son tan curiosos como los búfalos o los bisontes, e imagino que en la iglesia no los ves más que a medias. Resultan muy distintos a los colonos de tu tío o de sir James; son monstruos, granjeros sin terratenientes, no se sabe cómo clasificarlos.

—La mayoría de los que iban en la comitiva no son de Lowick —dijo sir James—; supongo que se trata de legatarios venidos de lejos o de Middlemarch. Lovegood me ha dicho que el anciano deja una buena cantidad de dinero además de las tierras.

—¿Qué les parece? ¡Cuando tantos hijos más jóvenes no tienen con qué pagarse la cena! —dijo la señora Cadwallader—. ¡Ah! —volviéndose con el ruido de la puerta al abrirse—, aquí está el señor Brooke. Tenía la impresión de que faltaba alguien y ahora ya sé por qué. Viene usted a ver este funeral tan extraño, ¿no es cierto?

—No; vengo a interesarme por Casaubon… ver cómo sigue, ya sabe. Y a traer una noticia… una pequeña noticia —dijo el señor Brooke, moviendo la cabeza en dirección a Dorothea mientras ella se le acercaba—. He mirado en la biblioteca y he visto a Casaubon con sus libros. Le he dicho que no puede ser; he dicho: «Esto no puede ser, ¿me comprende? Piense en su mujer, Casaubon». Y me ha prometido subir. No le he contado mi noticia: le he dicho que tenía que subir.

—¡Ah!, ahora están saliendo de la iglesia —exclamó la señora Cadwallader—. ¡Santo cielo, qué grupo tan dispar! El señor Lydgate debe de estar presente en su calidad de médico, supongo. Esa mujer es realmente bien parecida y ese joven rubio debe de ser su hijo. ¿Quiénes son, sir James? ¿Lo sabe usted?

—Veo a Vincy, el alcalde de Middlemarch; se trata, creo yo, de su mujer y de su hijo —respondió sir James, mirando con gesto interrogador al señor Brooke, que asintió con la cabeza y dijo:

—Sí, una excelente familia… Vincy es muy buena persona; un motivo de orgullo para los intereses industriales. Lo ha visto usted en mi casa, ¿no recuerda?

—¡Ah, sí!: uno de los miembros de su comité secreto —dijo la señora Cadwallader, con tono desafiante.

—Alguien que caza liebres, en cualquier caso —dijo sir James, con la repugnancia del cazador de zorros.

—Y uno de esos que chupan la vida de los desdichados tejedores de Tipton y Freshitt. Esa es la razón de que su familia sea tan rubia y parezca tan elegante —dijo la señora Cadwallader—. Esas personas morenas, de rostros encarnados, aportan un excelente contraste. ¡Son como un juego de cántaros! Hagan el favor de mirar a Humphrey: se le podría tomar por un feo arcángel destacando por encima de ellos con su sobrepelliz blanca.

—Un funeral es una cosa solemne, de todas formas —dijo el señor Brooke—, si se ve desde ese punto de vista, ya me comprende.

—Pero yo no lo veo así. No me puedo poner la solemnidad con demasiada frecuencia, porque acabaría hecha un guiñapo. Ya era hora de que el viejo se muriera, y ninguna de esas personas lo siente.

—¡Qué pena! —dijo Dorothea—. Este funeral es la cosa más deprimente que he visto nunca. Es un borrón en la mañana. No soporto la idea de que alguien muera sin dejar tras sí algo de amor.

Iba a seguir hablando, pero vio entrar a su marido, que fue a sentarse en segundo término. La presencia de Casaubon no siempre la hacía feliz: sentía que con frecuencia desaprobaba en su fuero interno las cosas que ella decía.

—¡Vaya! —exclamó la señora Cadwallader—, de detrás de ese hombre tan gordo ha salido un rostro más raro que todos los demás: una cabecita redonda con ojos muy saltones: una especie de cara de rana… Hagan el favor de mirar. Debe de ser de otra sangre, ¿no les parece?

—¡Déjeme ver! —dijo Celia, con renovada curiosidad, de pie detrás de la señora Cadwallader, e inclinándose hacia adelante por encima de su cabeza—. ¡Qué cara más extraña! —Luego, con un rápido cambio en la expresión de su rostro, añadió—: ¿Por qué no me has dicho que el señor Ladislaw venía otra vez aquí, Dodo?

Dorothea se alarmó inmediatamente: todo el mundo notó su repentina palidez al levantar de inmediato

la vista hacia su tío, mientras el señor Casaubon la miraba.

—Ha venido conmigo; es mi huésped… Me soporta con paciencia en Tipton Grange —dijo el señor Brooke, con su tono más natural, asintiendo con la cabeza en dirección a Dorothea, como si el anuncio que acababa de hacer fuese ni más ni menos lo que su sobrina podía esperar—. Y hemos traído el cuadro encima del coche. Sabía que iba a alegrarle esta sorpresa, Casaubon. Allí está usted, como en la vida real… representando a Tomás de Aquino, claro. Algo muy apropiado. Y ya oirá al joven Ladislaw hablar sobre ello. Habla extraordinariamente bien… señalando esto, aquello, y lo de más allá…; sabe mucho de pintura y de todas esas cosas… Una persona muy sociable, ya saben, dispuesto a acompañarle a uno en cualquier dirección… algo que he estado deseando durante mucho tiempo.

El señor Casaubon asintió con fría urbanidad, dominando su irritación, pero solo hasta el punto de seguir callado. Recordaba la carta de Will tan bien como Dorothea; era consciente de que no se hallaba entre el correo guardado para cuando él se encontrara mejor y, secretamente convencido de que su mujer había mandado recado a Will para que no se presentara en Lowick, su orgullosa susceptibilidad le había impedido volver a tocar el tema. Ahora concluyó que su mujer le había pedido al señor Brooke que invitara a Will a Tipton Grange; y Dorothea comprendió la imposibilidad de darle una explicación en aquel momento.

Los ojos de la señora Cadwallader, abandonando el cementerio, advirtieron un buen número de signos y gestos que no le resultaban todo lo inteligibles que ella hubiese deseado y no pudo reprimir la pregunta:

—¿Quién es el señor Ladislaw?

—Un joven pariente del señor Casaubon —dijo sir James con prontitud. Su buen corazón le hacía ser con frecuencia rápido y perspicaz en cuestiones personales y había adivinado, por la mirada de Dorothea a su marido, que existía algún motivo de alarma en los pensamientos de su cuñada.

—Un joven muy agradable… Casaubon lo ha hecho todo por él —explicó el señor Brooke—. Ha sido una inversión que merecía la pena, Casaubon —continuó, moviendo la cabeza alentadoramente—. Confío en que se quede conmigo una larga temporada y hagamos algo con mis documentos. Tengo gran cantidad de ideas y de datos, ya saben, y me doy cuenta de que él es precisamente el hombre capaz de darles forma… Se acuerda de cuáles son las citas que vienen al caso, *omne tulit punctum*[85] y cosas por el estilo… Hace que los temas tengan otro aspecto. Lo invité ya hace algún tiempo cuando estaba usted enfermo, Casaubon: Dorothea dijo que no podían tener a nadie en casa, ya sabe, y me pidió que le escribiera.

La pobre Dorothea sintió que cada palabra de su tío le resultaba al señor Casaubon tan agradable como un grano de arena en el ojo. Ahora estaría por completo fuera de lugar explicar que *ella* no había querido que su tío invitase a Will Ladislaw. Era incapaz de comprender las razones de la antipatía manifestada por su marido; antipatía dolorosamente grabada en ella por la escena en la biblioteca; pero sentía lo inapropiado de cualquier manifestación que pudiera transmitir tal idea a otras personas. Tampoco el señor Casaubon, en realidad, se había explicado por completo a sí mismo sus confusas razones; en su caso, como en el de todos nosotros, la irritación daba pie a la búsqueda de motivos justificativos más que a un deseo de autoconocimiento. Pero él quería reprimir cualquier exteriorización de sus sentimientos y solo Dorothea advirtió los cambios en el rostro de su marido antes de que él respondiera, con una inclinación de cabeza más ceremoniosa y un tonillo más marcado que de ordinario:

—Es usted muy hospitalario, mi querido señor; y debo manifestarle mi reconocimiento por practicar su hospitalidad con un pariente mío.

El funeral había terminado ya y el cementerio se estaba vaciando.

—Ahora puede verlo, señora Cadwallader —dijo Celia—. Es exactamente igual que una miniatura de la tía del señor Casaubon que está colgada en el *boudoir* de Dorothea… muy bien parecido.

—Un joven muy guapo —dijo la señora Cadwallader fríamente—. ¿A qué va a dedicarse su sobrino, señor Casaubon?

—Perdone, pero no es mi sobrino. Es mi primo.

—Bueno, ¿sabe usted? —intervino el señor Brooke—, está ensayando sus alas. Es precisamente uno de esos jóvenes que pueden volar muy alto. Me gustaría darle una oportunidad. Sería un buen secretario, realmente, como Hobbes, Milton, Swift… personas de ese tipo.

—Entiendo —dijo la señora Cadwallader—. Alguien capaz de escribir discursos.

—Voy a buscarlo ahora, ¿eh, Casaubon? —dijo el señor Brooke—. No quería entrar hasta que yo le hubiera anunciado, ya saben. Y bajaremos a ver el cuadro. Es su vivo retrato: un pensador sutil y profundo, con el dedo índice sobre un libro abierto, mientras san Buenaventura o alguien parecido, más bien gordo y colorado, levanta la vista hacia la Trinidad. Todo es simbólico, ya saben, el estilo más elevado en arte: a mí eso me gusta hasta cierto punto, pero sin ir demasiado lejos… Hay que esforzarse mucho para no quedarse

atrás, ya me entienden. Pero usted se encuentra ahí a sus anchas, Casaubon. Y el trabajo del pintor es de gran calidad: solidez, transparencia y todo lo demás. Estuve muy metido en eso en cierta época. Pero será mejor que baje a buscar a Ladislaw.

Capítulo XXXV

Non, je ne comprends pas de plus charmant plaisir
Que de voir d'héritiers une troupe affligée,
Le maintien interdit, et la mine allongée,
Lire un long testament où pâles, étonnés,
On leur laisse un bonsoir avec un pied de nez.
Pour voir au naturel leur tristesse profonde,
Je reviendrais, je crois, exprés de l'autre monde.[86]

REGNARD, *Le Légataire Universel*

Cuando los animales entraron por parejas en el Arca, cabe imaginar que las especies afines hicieran muchos comentarios unas sobre otras y tuvieran la tentación de pensar que tantas formas alimentándose en el mismo almacén de provisiones eran en gran medida superfluas, dado que eso suponía una reducción de las raciones. (Temo que el papel desempeñado por los buitres en aquella ocasión resultaría demasiado penoso para que el arte lo representara, ya que esas aves tropiezan con la desventaja de tener el gaznate pelado y, por lo que parece, carecen de ritos y ceremonias).

Tentaciones semejantes experimentaron los carnívoros cristianos que formaban el cortejo fúnebre de Peter Featherstone, ya que, en su mayor parte, no pensaban en otra cosa que en un limitado cúmulo de riquezas del que a cada uno le gustaría llevarse lo más posible. Los consanguíneos y parientes políticos sumaban ya un número considerable que, multiplicado por las diferentes posibilidades, ofrecía un amplio abanico para conjeturas inspiradas por los celos y las patéticas esperanzas. Los celos que suscitaban los Vincy habían creado un compañerismo en la hostilidad entre todas las personas que llevaban sangre Featherstone, de manera que en ausencia de cualquier decidida indicación de que uno de ellos fuese a recibir algo más que el resto, el temor de que aquel Fred Vincy de piernas largas se quedara con las tierras era necesariamente hegemónico, aunque dejaba espacio y tiempo libre para otros celos más vagos, como los que tenían a Mary Garth como objeto. Solomon tuvo ocasión para reflexionar sobre el hecho de que Jonah era indigno, y Jonah para calificar a Solomon de avaricioso; Jane, la hermana mayor, mantenía que los hijos de Martha no deberían esperar tanto como los jóvenes Waule; y Martha, más laxa en el asunto de la primogenitura, lamentaba tener que pensar que Jane fuera tan «acaparadora». Aquellos parientes más próximos se escandalizaban, como es lógico, con las aspiraciones, muy poco razonables, de primos carnales y primos segundos y usaban sus conocimientos de aritmética para calcular las grandes sumas que podían suponer los pequeños legados, si es que había demasiados. Dos primos carnales habían acudido para oír el testamento y, además del señor Trumbull, estaba presente otro primo segundo, mercero de Middlemarch, de modales corteses e innecesarias aspiraciones de la letra hache. Los dos primos carnales eran hombres de avanzada edad procedentes de Brassing; uno de ellos, convencido de sus derechos en razón de los gastos nada insignificantes realizados en forma de obsequios de ostras y otros manjares a Peter, su primo rico; el otro, terriblemente taciturno, con las manos y la barbilla apoyadas en un bastón, también estaba convencido de sus derechos, basados no en acciones concretas, sino en sus méritos en un sentido general; ambos primos eran ciudadanos sin tacha de Brassing, y querrían que Jonah Featherstone no viviera allí. De ordinario, al miembro ingenioso de una familia lo tratan mejor los extraños.

—El mismo Trumbull está seguro de recibir quinientas libras, no te quepa la menor duda… No me sorprendería que mi hermano se las hubiera prometido —dijo Solomon, cavilando en voz alta con sus

hermanas, la víspera del funeral.

—¡Válgame Dios! —dijo la pobre Martha, cuya capacidad para imaginar grandes cantidades de dinero se había visto reducida de ordinario al importe del alquiler de su casa cuando no podía pagarlo.

A la mañana siguiente, todas las conjeturas habituales se vieron perturbadas por la presencia de un forastero que había caído entre ellos como procedente de la luna. Se trataba de la persona a la que la señora Cadwallader había atribuido cara de rana: un hombre en torno a los treinta y dos o treinta y tres años, cuyos ojos saltones, boca de labios finos y curvada hacia abajo y pelo muy peinado y alisado a partir de una frente que se hundía de pronto por encima del reborde de las cejas, daban sin duda a su rostro la expresión inmutable característica de los batracios. Se trataba, sin duda, de un nuevo legatario; de lo contrario, ¿por qué estaba invitado a formar parte de la comitiva fúnebre? Eso significaba nuevas posibilidades, creaba una nueva incertidumbre que casi llegó a detener los comentarios en las carrozas de duelo. A todos nos humilla el repentino descubrimiento de un hecho que ha existido muy cómodamente y que quizá nos haya estado examinando en privado mientras nosotros fabricábamos nuestro mundo sin contar en absoluto con él. Nadie había visto antes a aquel desconocido tan sospechoso a excepción de Mary Garth, ya que aquel individuo había acudido a Stone Court en dos ocasiones cuando el señor Featherstone ocupaba aún el piso bajo y estuvo encerrado con él por espacio de varias horas. La muchacha tuvo oportunidad de contárselo a su padre y quizá los ojos de Caleb eran los únicos, a excepción de los del abogado, que examinaron al extraño con más curiosidad que repugnancia o sospecha. A Caleb Garth, que tenía muy pocas esperanzas y aún menos codicia, le interesaba comprobar sus suposiciones, y la calma con que, sonriendo a medias, se frotaba la barbilla y lanzaba miradas perspicaces, casi como si estuviera valorando un árbol, ofrecía un excelente contraste con la alarma o el desprecio visibles en otros rostros cuando el desconocido, cuyo apellido parecía ser Rigg, entró en el salón y tomó asiento cerca de la puerta como uno más de los asistentes a la lectura de la última voluntad del difunto. Precisamente en aquel momento el señor Solomon y el señor Jonah habían subido al piso alto con el abogado a buscar el testamento; y la señora Waule, al ver dos sitios vacíos entre el señor Borthrop Trumbull y ella, tuvo la presencia de ánimo suficiente para colocarse junto a la gran autoridad, que jugueteaba con los adornos de la cadena de su reloj y componía el perfil, decidido a no mostrar algo tan comprometedor para un hombre de talento como asombro o sorpresa.

—Supongo que está usted al corriente de todo lo que ha hecho mi pobre hermano, señor Trumbull —dijo la señora Waule, susurrando con su habitual voz algodonosa, mientras volvía el sombrero, ensombrecido por el crespón, hacia el oído de su interlocutor.

—Mi querida señora, todo lo que se me dijo fue a título confidencial —replicó el subastador, alzando una mano como para ocultar el secreto.

—Los que están muy seguros de su buena suerte quizá se lleven todavía una desilusión —continuó la señora Waule, hallando cierto alivio en aquellas palabras.

—Las esperanzas son con frecuencia engañosas —dijo el señor Trumbull, hablando todavía de manera confidencial.

—¡Ah! —exclamó la señora Waule, mirando a los Vincy que estaban al otro lado y volviendo luego junto a su hermana Martha—. Es extraordinario lo poco comunicativo que era el pobre Peter —dijo, en el mismo tono de voz que antes—. Ninguno de nosotros sabe cuáles eran sus intenciones. Solo espero y confío en que no fuese peor persona de lo que nos imaginamos, Martha.

La pobre señora Cranch era voluminosa y, por estar aquejada de asma, tenía, para que sus observaciones fueran irreprochables y de carácter muy vago, el motivo adicional de que sus susurros eran muy altos y susceptibles incluso de repentinos estallidos como los de un organillo que no funciona bien.

—Nunca he sido codiciosa, Jane —replicó—; pero tengo seis hijos, he enterrado a tres y no me casé con un hombre adinerado. El mayor, que está ahí sentado, solo tiene diecinueve años… así que saca consecuencias tú sola. Y el ganado siempre escaso y la tierra muy difícil. Si alguna vez he suplicado y he rezado, ha sido a Dios Todopoderoso; aunque con un hermano soltero y el otro sin hijos después de dos matrimonios… ¡cabría pensar otra cosa!

Mientras tanto, el señor Vincy, después de lanzar una ojeada al rostro inexpresivo del señor Rigg, sacó su caja de rapé y tamborileó en ella con los dedos, pero volvió a guardarla sin abrir, considerándolo una debilidad que, por mucho que ayudara a aclarar el juicio, resultaba poco adecuada en aquella ocasión.

—No me sorprendería que Featherstone tuviera mejores sentimientos de los que cualquiera de nosotros le atribuye —hizo notar, hablando al oído de su mujer—. Este funeral demuestra que ha pensado en todos: está bien que un hombre quiera verse acompañado por sus parientes y, si son humildes, está bien que no se avergüence de ellos. Me sentiría especialmente satisfecho si hubiese dejado muchos legados de poca cuantía. Pueden resultar muy útiles para personas de escasos recursos.

—Todo ha sido como cabría desear, crespón y seda y todo lo demás —dijo la señora Vincy con aire satisfecho.

Siento decir, sin embargo, que Fred encontraba cierta dificultad para reprimir la risa, lo que habría resultado mucho menos adecuado que la caja de rapé de su padre. Por casualidad Fred había oído a Jonah sugerir algo acerca de un «hijo del amor» y con esta idea en la cabeza, el rostro del desconocido, que se hallaba sentado frente a él, le parecía extraordinariamente ridículo. Mary Garth, adivinando el problema por las contracciones de su boca y su recurso a la tos, mostró su inteligencia al pedirle que se cambiara de sitio con ella, con lo que el joven Vincy se situó en un rincón mucho más en sombra. Fred se sentía muy bien dispuesto hacia todo el mundo, Rigg incluido; y al compadecerse un tanto de todas aquellas personas con menos suerte, no hubiese deseado por nada del mundo comportarse de manera impropia; echarse a reír, de todas formas, era sumamente fácil.

La entrada del abogado y de los dos hermanos del señor Featherstone atrajo la atención de todos.

El abogado era el señor Standish, que había acudido aquella mañana a Stone Court creyendo saber perfectamente quién se sentiría satisfecho y quién defraudado antes de que terminara el día. El testamento que esperaba leer era el último de los tres que había redactado para el señor Featherstone. El señor Standish no era un hombre que cambiara de modales: se comportaba con la misma espontánea cortesía y utilizaba la misma voz grave con todo el mundo, como si no advirtiera diferencia entre ellos, y hablaba en especial de la cosecha de heno, que iba a ser «¡extraordinaria, caramba!», de los últimos boletines sobre la salud del rey, y del duque de Clarence[87], que era un marino de cuerpo entero y el hombre idóneo para gobernar una isla como la Gran Bretaña.

El viejo Featherstone había pensado con frecuencia, sentado mirando al fuego, que Standish se quedaría muy sorprendido algún día: es cierto que, si hubiera hecho lo que quería al final y quemado el testamento redactado por otro abogado, no habría alcanzado esta meta de importancia secundaria; de todas formas disfrutó pensando en ello. Y desde luego el señor Standish quedó sorprendido, pero no lo sintió en absoluto; le proporcionó, por el contrario, el placer accesorio de la pizca de curiosidad personal que el descubrimiento de un segundo testamento añadía al asombro de la familia Featherstone que él ya había previsto.

En cuanto a los sentimientos de Solomon y Jonah, permanecían totalmente en suspenso: consideraban que el anterior testamento tendría cierta validez y que quizá las primeras y las ulteriores voluntades del pobre Peter estuvieran tan entrelazadas como para exigir interminables pleitos antes de que nadie recibiera lo suyo… un inconveniente que tendría al menos la ventaja de afectar a todos por igual. De aquí que los hermanos mostraran una circunspección del todo neutral al presentarse de nuevo en el salón con el señor Standish; pero Solomon sacó otra vez su pañuelo blanco, convencido de que en cualquier caso habría pasajes conmovedores y que los lloros en los funerales, por muy secos que resultasen, se aderezaban habitualmente con linón.

Quizá la persona que sintió mayor emoción en aquel momento fue Mary Garth, consciente de su responsabilidad en la aparición de aquel segundo testamento, de efectos tal vez trascendentales para el destino de algunos de los presentes. Nadie, excepto ella, sabía lo sucedido aquella última noche.

—El testamento que tengo en la mano —dijo el señor Standish, quien, sentado a la mesa que ocupaba el centro de la habitación, se tomaba su tiempo para todo, incluidas las toses con las que mostraba el deseo de aclararse la voz— fue redactado por mí y formalizado por nuestro desaparecido amigo el 9 de agosto de 1825. Pero descubro que existe un documento posterior hasta ahora desconocido para mí, con fecha de 20 de julio de 1826, algo menos de un año posterior al primero. Y existe además, por lo que veo —el señor Standish iba viajando cautelosamente por el documento con sus lentes—, un codicilo a este último testamento, con fecha de 1 de marzo de 1828.

—¡Válgame Dios! —dijo la hermana Martha, sin intención de hacerse oír, pero empujada a expresarse por la presión de las fechas.

—Empezaré leyendo el testamento más antiguo —continuó el señor Standish—, ya que tal parece haber sido la intención del difunto, puesto que no llegó a destruirlo.

Aquel preámbulo fue considerado bastante largo, y varias personas, además de Solomon, movieron la cabeza con patetismo, mirando al suelo: todos los ojos evitaban encontrarse con otros ojos y se detenían sobre todo en las manchas del mantel o en la cabeza calva del señor Standish, con la excepción de los de Mary Garth. Cuando los demás trataban de no mirar a ningún sitio en particular, ella podía contemplarlos sin peligro. Y al sonido del primer «otorgo y lego» vio cómo el color de los rostros cambiaba de manera sutil, como si alguna débil vibración estuviera pasando por ellos, salvo en el caso del señor Rigg, que continuó con su calma inalterable; el resto de los presentes, de hecho, preocupados por problemas más

importantes y por la complicación de escuchar legados que luego podían ser o no revocados, habían dejado de pensar en él. Fred se sonrojó y el señor Vincy descubrió que no resistiría sin tener en la mano la caja de rapé, aunque es cierto que no la abrió.

Los legados de poca importancia venían primero, e incluso el recuerdo de que había otro testamento y de que el pobre Peter podía haber rectificado no bastó para acallar la creciente repugnancia e indignación de buena parte de los presentes. A uno le gusta que le traten bien en todo momento: pasado, presente y futuro. Y allí había un Peter capaz, cinco años antes, de dejar tan solo doscientas libras a sus hermanos y hermanas y únicamente cien a sus sobrinos y sobrinas carnales: no se mencionaba a los Garth, pero la señora Vincy y Rosamond también recibían cien cada una. El señor Trumbull recibiría el bastón con puño de oro y cincuenta libras; los otros primos segundos y los primos carnales presentes tendrían la misma generosa cantidad, que, como hizo notar el primo taciturno, era un legado que no llevaba a un hombre a ningún sitio; y había muchos ejemplos más de aquella ofensiva llovizna en favor de personas que no estaban presentes: parientes problemáticos y —era de temer— de inferior condición. En total, calculando muy por encima, unas tres mil libras consumidas. ¿Adónde había pensado Peter que fuera el resto del dinero… y adónde las tierras? Y ¿qué era lo que había sido anulado y qué era lo que seguía teniendo valor… y era la anulación mejor o peor? Todas las emociones resultaban condicionales y podían estar en desacuerdo con la solución definitiva. Los varones tuvieron suficiente entereza para conservar la calma y soportar tanta incertidumbre y confusión: algunos dejando caer el labio inferior, otros frunciéndolo, de acuerdo con las costumbres de sus músculos. Pero Jane y Martha se hundieron ante aquel flujo de preguntas y empezaron a llorar: la pobre señora Cranch, conmovida a medias por el consuelo de recibir dos centenares de libras sin tener que trabajar en absoluto por ellas y convencida a medias de que su parte era escasa; mientras que la mente de la señora Waule quedaba enteramente inundada por el sentimiento de ser hermana del difunto y recibir poco, mientras alguna otra persona recibiría mucho. Ahora la impresión general era que el «mucho» iría a parar a Fred Vincy, pero los mismos Vincy quedaron sorprendidos cuando diez mil libras en inversiones fueron declaradas suyas… ¿Le corresponderían también las tierras? Fred se mordió los labios: era difícil reprimir una sonrisa y la misma señora Vincy se consideró la más feliz de las mujeres… toda posibilidad de anulación perdida de vista ante imágenes deslumbrantes.

Quedaba aún un residuo de propiedades personales además de las tierras, pero todo ello lo recibía una persona, y esa persona era… ¡Oh, posibilidades! ¡Oh, esperanzas fundadas en el favor de ancianos mezquinos! ¡Oh, interminables vocativos a pesar de los cuales seguiría siendo imposible expresar en su justa medida la insensatez de los mortales!… El heredero de todas las demás propiedades era Joshua Rigg, también único albacea, que a partir de aquel momento tomaría el nombre de Featherstone.

Se oyó un susurro que parecía como un escalofrío que recorría la habitación. Todos miraron de nuevo al señor Rigg, que dio la impresión de no experimentar la menor sorpresa.

—¡Una disposición testamentaria singular en extremo! —exclamó el señor Trumbull, prefiriendo por una vez que se le considerase ignorante en relación con el pasado—. Pero hay un segundo testamento… Hay otro documento. Aún no hemos oído la última voluntad del fallecido.

Mary Garth se daba cuenta de que lo que les quedaba por oír no era la última voluntad del señor Featherstone. El segundo testamento lo revocaba todo a excepción de los legados a personas de inferior condición antes mencionadas (con algunas modificaciones recogidas en el codicilo) y de la atribución de todas las tierras en la parroquia de Lowick, con todo el ganado y los muebles de la casa, a Joshua Rigg. El resto de la propiedad se dedicaría a la construcción y dotación de asilos para ancianos, que se llamarían Asilos Featherstone y que se edificarían en un terreno cercano a Middlemarch, que ya había sido comprado con ese fin por el testador, con el deseo —así lo declaraba el documento— de agradar a Dios Todopoderoso. Nadie más recibía un solo penique, aunque el señor Trumbull conservaba el bastón con puño de oro. Tuvo que pasar algún tiempo para que los presentes recobraran la capacidad de expresión. Mary no se atrevió a mirar a Fred.

El señor Vincy fue el primero en hablar, después de usar la caja de rapé con gran energía, y lo hizo lleno de violenta indignación.

—¡El más inexplicable testamento que he oído nunca! Yo diría que el difunto no estaba en su sano juicio. Diría que este último testamento es nulo —afirmó el señor Vincy, sintiendo que con aquella observación se enfocaban las cosas correctamente—, ¿no opina usted lo mismo, Standish?

—Nuestro desaparecido amigo siempre supo lo que se traía entre manos, creo yo —dijo el señor Standish—. Todo está perfectamente en orden. Aquí hay una carta de Clemmens unida al testamento. Él lo redactó. Se trata de un abogado muy respetable de Brassing.

—Yo no advertí nunca la menor alienación mental, la menor aberración del intelecto del difunto señor

Featherstone —dijo Borthrop Trumbull—, pero califico ese testamento de excéntrico. Siempre presté gustosamente servicios al pobre viejo; y él manifestó con gran claridad un sentimiento de gratitud que encontraría su expresión en el testamento. El bastón con puño de oro es una cosa ridícula como reconocimiento de esa deuda; gracias a Dios estoy por encima de cualquier consideración mercenaria.

—A mí no me sorprende demasiado —dijo Caleb Garth—. Cualquiera tendría más razones para sorprenderse si el testamento hubiese sido el que cabría esperar de un hombre sincero y razonable. Por mi parte, desearía que no existiesen los testamentos.

—Ese es un extraño punto de vista para un cristiano, a fe mía —dijo el abogado—. ¡Me gustaría saber en qué apoya usted esa afirmación, Garth!

Caleb dejó escapar una débil exclamación, se inclinó hacia adelante, unió con cuidado las puntas de los dedos y contempló el suelo meditativamente. Siempre le parecía que las palabras eran la parte más difícil de los «negocios».

En aquel momento el señor Jonah Featherstone tomó la palabra.

—La verdad es que mi hermano Peter era un gran hipócrita, ya lo creo que sí. Pero ese testamento va mucho más lejos. De haberlo sabido, ni un carro con seis caballos hubiera podido traerme desde Brassing. Mañana mismo me pondré un sombrero blanco y una chaqueta de color.

—¡Válgame Dios! —sollozó la señora Cranch—, ¡y nosotros que hemos tenido que gastar en el viaje y ese pobre chico que ha estado aquí tanto tiempo sin hacer nada! Nunca supe que mi hermano Peter tuviera tantas ganas de agradar a Dios Todopoderoso; pero aunque me quede paralítica tengo que decir que es muy duro… No puedo pensar de otra manera.

—No le servirá de nada en el sitio adonde ha ido, eso es lo que yo creo —dijo Solomon, con una amargura que era sorprendentemente sincera, aunque no pudiera evitar el tono artificioso—. Peter era una mala persona y los asilos no van a ocultar los hechos cuando ha tenido la desvergüenza de mostrar su maldad hasta en el último momento.

—Y mientras tanto tenía su propia familia, hermanos y hermanas y sobrinos y sobrinas, y se sentaba con ellos en la iglesia cuando se dignaba ir —dijo la señora Waule—. Y podía haber dejado sus propiedades a gente respetable, a personas nada inconstantes ni dadas a extravagancias en ningún sentido y aunque pobres, capaces de ahorrar penique a penique y hacer que el dinero dé su rendimiento. Y yo… ¡las dificultades que he tenido una y otra vez para venir aquí y ser una buena hermana!… Y él todo el tiempo con ideas en la cabeza que darían escalofríos a cualquiera. Pero si el Todopoderoso lo ha permitido, es porque va a castigarle por ello. Hermano Solomon, voy a marcharme, si me llevas contigo.

—No deseo volver a poner los pies en esta casa —dijo Solomon—. Tengo tierra y propiedades mías que puedo dejar a quien me plazca.

—Es bien triste ver cómo se reparte la suerte en este mundo —dijo Jonah—. Nunca sirve de nada tener un poco de buen humor. Más vale ser como el perro del hortelano. Quizá los que aún están en la tierra aprendan la lección. Basta con el testamento de un estúpido en la familia.

—Hay muchas maneras de ser estúpido —dijo Solomon—. No dejaré mi dinero para que alguien lo tire por la ventana, ni tampoco a los incluseros de África. Me gustan los Featherstone criados como tales y no los que se convierten en Featherstone pegándoles el nombre.

Solomon dirigió estas observaciones a la señora Waule en un aparte pero con voz muy alta mientras se levantaba para acompañarla. El hermano Jonah estaba seguro de poder hacer comentarios mucho más mordaces, pero consideró que no tenía sentido ofender al nuevo propietario de Stone Court hasta estar seguro de que carecía por completo de intenciones hospitalarias con los hombres ingeniosos cuyo apellido se disponía a adoptar.

Al señor Joshua Rigg, de hecho, parecían preocuparle muy poco las insinuaciones, y manifestó en seguida un notable cambio de actitud, acercándose con gran tranquilidad al señor Standish y haciéndole preguntas muy precisas sobre cuestiones de negocios. Tenía una voz chirriante muy aguda y un pésimo acento. Fred, a quien ya no movía en absoluto a risa, lo consideró el monstruo más repulsivo que había visto nunca. Pero Fred se sentía bastante enfermo. El mercero de Middlemarch aguardaba la oportunidad de iniciar una conversación con el señor Rigg: quién podía saber cuántos pares de medias iba a necesitar el nuevo propietario, y los beneficios comerciales eran más seguros que los legados. El mercero, además, por su condición de primo segundo, era lo bastante imparcial para sentir curiosidad.

El señor Vincy, después de su primera explosión, había guardado un orgulloso silencio, aunque estaba demasiado abrumado por molestos sentimientos para pensar en marcharse, hasta que observó que su mujer había ido a reunirse con Fred y lloraba en silencio, estrechando entre las suyas la mano de su hijo preferido. El alcalde de Middlemarch se puso inmediatamente en pie y volvió la espalda a los presentes mientras le

decía en voz baja a su esposa:

—Domínate, Lucy; no hagas el ridículo delante de esta gente. —Y luego añadió con su habitual voz sonora—: Sal a pedir el faetón; no tengo tiempo que perder.

Antes de esto, Mary Garth se estaba preparando ya para volver a casa con su padre. Fred y ella se encontraron en el vestíbulo, y fue ahora cuando tuvo por vez primera valor para mirarlo. El joven Vincy tenía ese tipo de marchita palidez que surge a veces en el rostro de los jóvenes y su mano estaba muy fría cuando estrechó la suya. También a Mary la dominaba la agitación: era consciente de que por fatalidad, sin quererlo, quizá había tenido gran influencia sobre el destino de Fred.

—Adiós —dijo con cariñosa tristeza—. Ten valor, Fred. Creo de verdad que es mejor para ti quedarte sin el dinero. ¿De qué le ha servido al señor Featherstone?

—Todo eso está muy bien —dijo Fred, con displicencia—. Pero ¿qué quieres que haga? Ahora no me queda más remedio que entrar en la Iglesia. —Sabía que aquello iba a molestar a Mary; muy bien: entonces que ella le dijera qué otras posibilidades tenía—. Pensaba además que podría pagar a tu padre de inmediato y arreglarlo todo de una vez. Y a ti ni siquiera te ha dejado cien libras. ¿Qué vas a hacer ahora, Mary?

—Aceptar otro empleo, por supuesto, tan pronto como lo encuentre. Mi padre tiene bastante quehacer ocupándose del resto. Adiós.

En muy breve espacio de tiempo Stone Court quedó libre de bien sazonados Featherstone y demás visitantes de larga tradición. Otro extraño iba a instalarse en los alrededores de Middlemarch, pero en el caso del señor Rigg Featherstone había más descontento ante las visibles consecuencias inmediatas que reflexiones sobre los efectos que su presencia pudiera tener en el futuro. No existía ninguna alma lo bastante profética para barruntar qué era lo que podía aparecer tras las huellas de Joshua Rigg.

Y aquí, como es normal, me veo empujada a reflexionar sobre los medios para elevar un tema de poca altura. Los paralelos históricos son extraordinariamente eficaces en este sentido. La principal objeción contra ellos es que al diligente narrador quizá le falte espacio, o (lo que con frecuencia es la misma cosa) no sea capaz de pensar en ellos con cierto grado de convicción, aunque tenga la seguridad, que podríamos llamar filosófica, de que si esos detalles se conocieran serían ilustrativos. Un camino más fácil y más rápido de alcanzar la dignidad parece ser la observación —puesto que nunca ha existido una historia verdadera que no pudiera contarse en parábolas mediante la sustitución de un marqués por un mono y viceversa— de que todo lo que ya he narrado o narre en el futuro sobre personas de baja condición puede ennoblecerse considerándolo como una parábola; de manera que si salen a escena malas costumbres y sus feas consecuencias, el lector tenga el alivio de juzgarlas tan solo figurativamente indecorosas y se considere en la práctica acompañado por personas de cierta distinción. Así, mientras yo digo la verdad sobre unos palurdos, la imaginación de mis lectores no debe excluir por completo la posibilidad de tratar con lores; y la mezquina cantidad con que cualquier insolvente de alta categoría sentiría tener que jubilarse puede ascenderse hasta elevadas transacciones comerciales mediante la nada costosa adición de un número proporcional de ceros.

Cualquier historia provinciana en la que los actores sean todos de gran categoría moral ha de referirse sin duda a una fecha muy posterior a la primera ley de la reforma electoral, y ya se dan ustedes cuenta de que Peter Featherstone estaba muerto y enterrado algunos meses antes de que lord Grey[88] tomara posesión de su cargo de primer ministro.

Capítulo XXXVI

Es extraño ver el talante de estos hombres,
de estas almas con grandes aspiraciones, que deberían ser prudentes:

Porque al ser natural en esas almas grandes que quieran
estar donde sean más eminentes,
considerándose muy por encima
de nosotros gracias al engreimiento, con quien tienen trato frecuente,
se imaginan lo mucho que admiramos y estimamos
todo lo que dicen o llevan a cabo; lo que les hace esforzarse
para lograr que aumente nuestra admiración,
y solo creen conseguirlo, si nos informan
de sus más elevados y extraordinarios pensamientos.

SAMUEL DANIEL, *Tragedy of Philotas*

El señor Vincy volvió a su casa después de la lectura del testamento con puntos de vista considerablemente distintos sobre muchas cuestiones. Era un hombre razonable, pero con tendencia a expresarse de forma indirecta: cuando en un mercado iban mal sus cintas de seda, insultaba al mozo de cuadra; cuando su cuñado Bulstrode lo había irritado, hacía comentarios mordaces sobre el metodismo; y ahora, al tirar un gorro con bordados desde el salón de fumar al suelo del vestíbulo, ponía de manifiesto el profundo desagrado que le inspiraba la ociosidad de Fred.

—Bien, caballerete —hizo notar cuando su hijo se dirigía hacia su cuarto para acostarse—, espero que te hayas decidido a volver a la universidad el semestre próximo y a aprobar de una vez los exámenes. Yo ya he resuelto lo que voy a hacer, y te aconsejo que no pierdas tiempo y hagas lo mismo.

Fred no contestó: se sentía demasiado deprimido. Veinticuatro horas antes estaba seguro de que al día siguiente, en lugar de plantearse lo que tenía que hacer, sabría ya que no necesitaba hacer nada: que cazaría con chaqueta de color rosa, tendría un caballo de caza de primera clase, utilizaría monturas excelentes para viajar y todo el mundo le respetaría por ello; más aún, estaría de inmediato en condiciones de pagar al señor Garth, y Mary no tendría ya razón alguna para rechazarlo. Y todo aquello se habría producido sin estudiar y sin molestias de ninguna clase, tan solo por el favor de la Providencia, disfrazada de capricho de un caballero anciano. Ahora, en cambio, al cabo de veinticuatro horas, todas aquellas sólidas esperanzas se habían venido abajo. Era muy duro que, cuando aún le escocía la desilusión que acababa de sufrir, se le tratara como si hubiese estado en su mano evitarlo. Pero se marchó en silencio y su madre intercedió por él.

—No seas tan duro con el pobre chico, Vincy. Ya verás cómo le acabarán saliendo bien las cosas aunque ese hombre inicuo lo haya engañado. Estoy tan segura de que a Fred le saldrán bien las cosas como de que estoy ahora sentada aquí… si no, ¿por qué nos lo ha devuelto Dios cuando estaba ya con un pie en la tumba? Y yo a eso lo llamo robo: prometerle la tierra era como dársela; y ¿qué es prometer, sino hacérselo creer a todo el mundo? Y ya has visto que le dejó diez mil libras y luego se las quitó.

—¡Se las quitó, se las quitó! —dijo el señor Vincy con gesto agrio—. Yo te digo que ese chico no tiene suerte, Lucy. Y tú lo has mimado siempre.

—Sí, Vincy, pero era mi primer hijo, y bien que tú hiciste alharacas cuando nació. Estabas tan orgulloso como el que más —dijo la señora Vincy, recobrando con facilidad su alegre sonrisa.

—¿Quién sabe cómo va a resultar un recién nacido? Supongo que fui lo bastante estúpido para hacer todo eso —replicó el alcalde con mayor suavidad, sin embargo.

—Anda, dime quién tiene unos hijos mejores y más guapos que los nuestros. Fred es muy superior a los de otras personas: se nota cuando habla que ha tratado con gente de la universidad. Y Rosamond… ¿dónde hay una chica como ella? Puede ponerse al lado de cualquier dama de este país y salir ganando en la comparación. Ya ves, el señor Lydgate se ha relacionado con la mejor gente y ha estado en todas partes, y se enamoró de ella en seguida. Aunque yo preferiría que Rosamond no estuviese prometida. Podría haber encontrado a alguien que fuese mucho mejor partido; por ejemplo, durante una visita a casa de su compañera de internado la señorita Willoughby. Esa familia tiene relaciones de tanta alcurnia como las del señor Lydgate.

—¡Malditas relaciones! —dijo el señor Vincy—; estoy harto de ellas. No quiero un yerno que solo posee relaciones por toda recomendación.

—Pues parecías más contento que unas pascuas —dijo la señora Vincy—. Es cierto que yo no estaba en casa; pero Rosamond me ha contado que no dijiste una sola palabra en contra. Y tu hija ya se está comprando el mejor lino y la mejor batista para su ropa interior.

—No con mi consentimiento —dijo el señor Vincy—. Ya tengo bastantes obligaciones este año, con un pícaro holgazán por hijo, para pagar además un equipo de novia. Los tiempos no pueden ser más difíciles; todo el mundo se está arruinando; y no creo que Lydgate tenga un céntimo. No voy a dar mi consentimiento a ese matrimonio. Que esperen, como hicieron sus mayores antes que ellos.

—Rosamond lo llevará muy a mal, Vincy, y sabes perfectamente que no soportas verla enfadada.

—Sí, claro que puedo soportarlo. Cuanto antes se rompa el compromiso, mejor. No creo que Lydgate llegue nunca a tener unos ingresos decentes, por el camino que va. Hace enemigos; eso es todo lo que ha conseguido por el momento.

—Pero el señor Bulstrode tiene muy buena opinión de él. Ese matrimonio le agradará, creo yo.

—¡Me tiene sin cuidado a quién le agrade! —dijo el señor Vincy—. No será Bulstrode quien pague los gastos. Y si Lydgate piensa que voy a darles dinero para que pongan casa, está equivocado, eso es todo. Creo que voy a tener que renunciar muy pronto a mis caballos. Será mejor que le cuentes a Rosy lo que te he dicho.

Aquel era un procedimiento habitual del señor Vincy: dar de manera precipitada su alegre asentimiento y, al percatarse después de su error, utilizar a otros para llevar a cabo la ofensiva retractación. La señora Vincy, que nunca se oponía de manera deliberada a su marido, le contó a su hija sin perder tiempo lo que había dicho su padre. Rosamond, que estaba examinando unos bordados sobre muselina, escuchó en silencio y al final giró un tanto su elegante cuello, gesto que tan solo una larga experiencia permitiría reconocer por lo que era: expresión de total testarudez.

—¿Qué te parece, hija mía? —preguntó la madre con afectuosa deferencia.

—En realidad papá no quiere decir nada de eso —respondió Rosamond, con gran calma—. Siempre ha afirmado que deseaba que yo me casase con el hombre al que quisiera. Voy a casarme con Lydgate. Hace siete semanas que papá dio su consentimiento. Y espero conseguir la casa de la señora Bretton.

—Bueno, Rosy; dejaré que te entiendas tú sola con papá. Siempre consigues lo que te propones. Pero si de verdad vamos a comprar damasco, a donde hay que ir es a Sadler's… mucho mejor que a Hopkin's. Y piensa que la casa de la señora Bretton es muy grande; me encantaría que vivieras en un sitio así, pero necesitarás muchísimos muebles… alfombras y todo lo demás, aparte de la vajilla y la cristalería. Y ya has oído que papá no está dispuesto a dar dinero. ¿Tú crees que el señor Lydgate espera que corra con los gastos?

—No supondrás que se lo voy a preguntar, mamá. No me cabe la menor duda de que sabe lo que hace.

—Cabe que contara con algún dinero tuyo, y nosotros creíamos que tendrías tu parte en la herencia, igual que Fred; y ahora todo se ha venido abajo… Ya no es posible disfrutar haciendo ningún plan, después de la desilusión que se ha llevado ese pobre chico.

—Eso no tiene nada que ver con mi boda, mamá. Lo que Fred necesita es dejar de hacer el vago. Voy a subir estos bordados a la señorita Morgan: hace muy bien los dobladillos. Ahora que lo pienso, Mary Garth podría hacer algunas cosas para mí. Cose maravillosamente; para mi gusto es su mejor cualidad. Me encantaría tener todos los volantes de batista con remates dobles. Y eso lleva mucho tiempo.

La señora Vincy tenía toda la razón al pensar que Rosamond lograría convencer a su papá. El señor Vincy, a pesar de sus fanfarronadas, se salía tan poco con la suya como un primer ministro: la fuerza de las circunstancias lo desbordaba con facilidad, como les sucede a la mayoría de los hombres de constitución sanguínea amantes del placer; y la circunstancia llamada Rosamond poseía una gran eficacia gracias a esa

dulce tenacidad que, como sabemos, permite a una sustancia viva, blanca y suave, abrirse camino a pesar de la hostilidad de la piedra. Papá Vincy no tenía nada de pétreo: su única rigidez era la de los impulsos alternativos que reciben a veces el nombre de costumbre, del todo contrarios a que tomara la única línea válida de conducta en relación con el compromiso de su hija, es decir, investigar la situación de Lydgate, manifestar su personal incapacidad para aportar fondos, y prohibir tanto un matrimonio precipitado como un noviazgo que tuviera que prolongarse en demasía. Eso parece muy simple y fácil al enunciarlo; pero una desagradable resolución formada en las frías horas de la mañana tiene tantas cosas en contra como la escarcha, y muy pocas veces persiste bajo la influencia del sol. La manera de expresar sus opiniones a que tendía el señor Vincy —indirecta aunque enérgica— tropezó con serios obstáculos en aquel caso: Lydgate era un hombre orgulloso a quien podían resbalarle las insinuaciones, y el recurso de arrojar el sombrero al suelo resultaba inaceptable. El señor Vincy sentía cierto temor respetuoso hacia el médico, le halagaba un tanto que quisiera casarse con Rosamond, no se sentía muy dispuesto a plantear el problema del dinero, asunto en el que su posición no era ventajosa, tenía miedo de quedar en mal lugar al dialogar con un hombre mejor educado y de cuna más aristocrática que la suya, y también le asustaba un poco hacer algo que no le gustase a su hija. Al señor Vincy le encantaba representar el papel de generoso anfitrión a quien nadie critica. En la primera mitad del día los negocios impedían cualquier comunicación explícita de una resolución adversa; y lo mismo sucedía en la segunda mitad, a causa de la cena, el vino, los naipes y un ambiente general de satisfacción. Y mientras tanto las horas, una a una, iban dejando su pequeño depósito y formando gradualmente la razón definitiva para la inacción, a saber: que ya era demasiado tarde para hacer nada.

El novio formal pasaba la mayor parte de sus veladas en Lowick Gate y, bajo los ojos mismos del señor Vincy, florecían de continuo unas relaciones amorosas que no dependían en absoluto de anticipos por parte del suegro ni de futuros ingresos en el ejercicio de una profesión. El amor entre los jóvenes… ¡esa sutil tela de araña! Incluso los puntos donde se sujeta, las cosas de donde cuelgan sus entrecruzados hilos casi invisibles, son apenas perceptibles: contactos pasajeros con las puntas de los dedos, miradas que se cruzan entre un iris azul y otro más oscuro, frases sin terminar, imperceptibles cambios en la mejilla y en el labio, mínimos temblores. La telaraña misma se hace con creencias espontáneas y alegrías indefinibles, con una vida que desea ardientemente a la otra, con visiones de realización total, con confianza sin límites. Y Lydgate empezó a tejer aquella tela desde su ser más íntimo con maravillosa rapidez, a pesar de que el drama de Laure parecía haber cerrado toda posibilidad; a pesar de la medicina y de la biología; porque se ha observado que la inspección de músculos macerados o de ojos presentados en una bandeja (como los de santa Lucía) y otras incidencias de la investigación científica, son menos incompatibles con el amor poético que una torpeza congénita o una preferencia decidida por la prosa de más baja calidad. En cuanto a Rosamond, se hallaba sumida en la autocomplacencia del nenúfar ante la creciente plenitud de su vida, y también ella tejía industriosamente la telaraña común. Todo esto sucedía en el rincón de la sala donde se encontraba el piano y, a pesar de que la tela era muy sutil, la luz la convertía en una especie de arco iris visible para muchos observadores además del señor Farebrother. Sin necesidad de anuncio oficial, el compromiso matrimonial entre la señorita Vincy y el señor Lydgate se convirtió en hecho aceptado por todo Middlemarch.

La tía Harriet se sintió de nuevo presa de agitación, pero esta vez se dirigió directamente a su hermano, yendo al almacén para evitar la volubilidad de la señora Vincy. Las respuestas que recibió no fueron satisfactorias.

—Walter, ¿no querrás decirme que has permitido todo esto sin informarte sobre la situación económica del señor Lydgate? —exclamó la señora Bulstrode, mirando con ojos muy abiertos por la preocupación a su hermano, que tenía el mal humor habitual de sus jornadas en el almacén—. Piensa en esa chica criada en el lujo… de una manera demasiado mundana, siento tener que decirlo… ¿Qué hará con unos ingresos modestos?

—¡Maldita sea, Harriet! ¿Qué puedo hacer cuando vienen hombres a la ciudad sin que yo lo pida? ¿Es que tú le has negado la entrada en tu casa? Bulstrode lo ha promocionado más que nadie. Yo no he hecho nunca tantas alharacas. Deberías ir a hablar con él, en lugar de conmigo.

—Vamos, Walter, ¿cómo puedes decir que mi marido tiene la culpa? Estoy segura de que no deseaba ese compromiso.

—Pues si Bulstrode no lo hubiese traído de la mano, yo nunca lo habría invitado.

—Tú lo llamaste para que atendiera a Fred, y estoy segura de que eso fue una gracia de Dios —dijo la señora Bulstrode, perdiendo el hilo de su razonamiento en las complejidades del asunto.

—No sé yo si fue una gracia —dijo el señor Vincy con tono irritado—. Lo que sí sé es que mi familia me

preocupa más de lo que quisiera. Yo era un buen hermano para ti, Harriet, antes de que te casaras con Bulstrode, y tengo que decir que mi cuñado no siempre trata a tu familia con el espíritu amistoso que cabría esperar de él. —El señor Vincy tenía muy poco en común con los jesuitas, pero ni el jesuita más consumado podría haberle dado la vuelta a una pregunta con más habilidad. Harriet tuvo que defender a su marido en lugar de atacar a su hermano, y la conversación acabó en un punto tan lejano del comienzo como en una reciente confrontación entre los cuñados en una reunión de la junta parroquial.

La señora Bulstrode no transmitió a su marido las quejas de su hermano, pero por la noche le habló de Lydgate y Rosamond. Él, sin embargo, no compartía su cálido interés; y solo habló con resignación de los riesgos que se corren al comenzar el ejercicio de la medicina y de la conveniencia de actuar con prudencia.

—No me cabe la menor duda de que estamos obligados a rezar por esa muchacha tan imprudente… teniendo en cuenta cómo la han educado —dijo la señora Bulstrode, deseosa de estimular los sentimientos de su marido.

—Tienes mucha razón, querida —respondió el señor Bulstrode, con gesto aprobador—. Quienes no son de este mundo apenas pueden hacer otra cosa para combatir los errores de los que se obstinan en ser mundanos. Eso es lo que tenemos que acostumbrarnos a reconocer en el caso de la familia de tu hermano. Yo podría haber deseado que el señor Lydgate no diera semejante paso; pero mis relaciones con él se limitan a hacer uso de sus talentos para llevar a cabo la voluntad de Dios, voluntad que el gobierno divino nos va mostrando en cada caso.

La señora Bulstrode no dijo nada más, atribuyendo la insatisfacción que le produjeron aquellas palabras a su propia falta de espiritualidad. Estaba convencida de que su marido era uno de esos hombres cuya biografía tendría que escribirse cuando muriera.

En cuanto al mismo Lydgate, una vez prometido, estaba dispuesto a cargar con todas las consecuencias del sí, consecuencias que creía ver con total claridad. Era evidente que tenía que casarse en el espacio de un año… quizá incluso de medio año. No había sido esa su intención; pero sus otros planes no se verían perjudicados: tan solo sería necesario hacer un reajuste. El matrimonio, por supuesto, debía prepararse de la manera habitual. Era necesario tomar casa para sustituir las habitaciones que ocupaba por entonces y Lydgate, al oír hablar a Rosamond con admiración de la casa de la anciana señora Bretton (situada en Lowick Gate), entró en seguida en negociaciones para ocuparla cuando supo que quedaba libre al fallecer la anciana señora.

Esto lo hizo como de pasada, de manera muy parecida a como daba órdenes a su sastre sobre todos los requisitos del buen vestir, sin pensar por ello que hubiese nada dispendioso en su conducta. Por el contrario, le habría parecido despreciable cualquier ostentación en el gasto; su profesión le había familiarizado con todos los niveles de la pobreza y se interesaba mucho por las personas que sufrían privaciones. Lydgate se habría comportado perfectamente en una mesa en la que se sirviera la salsa en un recipiente al que le faltara el asa, y de una cena suntuosa habría recordado tan solo la presencia en ella de un hombre que hablaba bien. Pero nunca se le ocurrió que debiera vivir de una forma que no fuese lo que él llamaba ordinaria, con copas verdes para el vino del Rin y un excelente servicio en el comedor. Haber caldeado su espíritu con teorías sociales francesas no hizo que trajera a Inglaterra olor a chamusquina. Podemos manejar con impunidad incluso opiniones radicales si nuestros muebles, las cenas que damos y nuestras preferencias en cuanto a escudos de armas nos ligan indisolublemente con el orden establecido. Y las tendencias de Lydgate no se orientaban a las opiniones radicales: no le hubiese gustado una doctrina de orden descalza, ya que era muy exigente con sus zapatos: su radicalismo se centraba solo en la reforma de la medicina y en la perseverancia en la investigación científica. En todas las demás cosas de la vida práctica se guiaba por costumbres heredadas; en parte como consecuencia de ese orgullo personal y de ese egoísmo irreflexivo al que ya he denominado en otro momento vulgaridad y en parte por esa ingenuidad que surgía de la obsesión por sus ideas predilectas.

Los debates internos que Lydgate mantuvo sobre las consecuencias de un compromiso que se le había venido encima por sorpresa, giraban más en torno a la escasez de tiempo que de dinero. Es cierto que estar enamorado, y saberse esperado a todas horas por una persona que siempre resultaba ser más bonita que su recuerdo, hacía difícil el uso diligente de las horas libres que podían servir a algún «alemán lento y perseverante» para realizar el grande, el inminente descubrimiento. Aquello era, en realidad, un argumento para no retrasar demasiado el matrimonio, tal como le dio a entender al señor Farebrother un día en que el vicario se presentó en su alojamiento con algunas criaturas de estanque, deseoso de examinarlas con un microscopio mejor que el suyo y que, al encontrar en estado de confusión la mesa de Lydgate, repleta de aparatos y especímenes, comentó sarcásticamente:

—Eros ha degenerado; empezó introduciendo orden y armonía, y ahora trae de nuevo el caos.

—Sí, durante algunos períodos —dijo Lydgate, alzando las cejas y sonriendo, mientras empezaba a preparar el microscopio—. Pero después comenzará otro mejor.

—¿Pronto? —quiso saber el vicario.

—Eso espero. Esta situación de provisionalidad consume mucho tiempo, y cuando uno tiene ideas científicas, cada momento es una oportunidad. Estoy seguro de que el matrimonio tiene que ser la situación ideal para un hombre que quiere trabajar con perseverancia. Lo tiene todo en casa… sin la molestia de preocupaciones personales… Está en condiciones de conseguir calma y libertad.

—Tiene usted una suerte envidiable —dijo el vicario— con semejantes perspectivas: Rosamond, calma y libertad, todo a su alcance. Aquí estoy yo sin otra cosa que mi pipa y mis animálculos de charca. Vamos a ver, ¿ya está listo?

Lydgate no mencionó al vicario otra razón para acortar el período de noviazgo. Le resultaba molesto, incluso con el vino del amor en las venas, verse obligado a estar presente con tanta frecuencia en las reuniones familiares de los Vincy, y a participar tanto en las habladurías de Middlemarch, en prolijas manifestaciones de buen humor, partidas de *whist* y frivolidad generalizada. Tenía que mostrar deferencia cuando el señor Vincy solucionaba problemas con ignorancia dogmática, especialmente sobre licores que constituían el mejor conservante interior, capaces de proteger del mal aire. La franqueza y la simplicidad de la señora Vincy no se veían en absoluto empañadas con sospechas sobre las sutiles maneras en que podía ofender el buen gusto de su futuro yerno; y, en conjunto, Lydgate tenía que confesarse que estaba bajando un tanto de nivel al emparentarse con la familia de Rosamond. Si bien aquella exquisita criatura sufría de la misma manera que él: al menos era un consuelo delicioso pensar que al casarse con ella podía proporcionarle el trasplante del que tan necesitada estaba.

—¡Querida! —le dijo una tarde, con su tono más tierno, mientras se sentaba a su lado mirándola atentamente.

Primero debo decir que la había encontrado sola en el salón, donde la amplia ventana a la antigua usanza, que casi ocupaba todo un lado de la habitación, estaba abierta a los aromas estivales del jardín situado detrás de la casa. Su padre y su madre habían ido a una fiesta, y los demás miembros de la familia estaban fuera con las mariposas.

—¡Querida! Tienes los párpados enrojecidos.

—¿De veras? —dijo Rosamond—. No sé por qué. —Nunca necesitaba desahogar ni sus anhelos ni sus agravios. Solo surgían graciosamente cuando eran solicitados.

—¡Como si fueras capaz de ocultármelo! —dijo Lydgate, poniendo tiernamente una mano sobre las de Rosamond—. ¿No estoy viendo una gota diminuta en una de tus pestañas? Hay cosas que te preocupan y no me las cuentas. Eso es falta de amor.

—¿Para qué voy a contarte algo que no puedes cambiar? Son las cosas de todos los días: quizá haya sido un poco peor últimamente.

—Disgustos familiares. No tengas miedo de hablar. Me los imagino.

—Papá está más irritable. Fred hace que se enfade, y esta mañana han vuelto a pelearse porque mi hermano amenaza con tirar toda su educación por la ventana y hacer algo indigno de él. Y además…

Rosamond vaciló, y sus mejillas empezaron a sonrojarse levemente. Desde la mañana de su compromiso matrimonial, Lydgate no la había visto nunca preocupada, ni había tenido tampoco unos sentimientos tan apasionados como en aquel momento. Besó con suavidad aquellos labios vacilantes como para darles ánimo.

—Tengo la impresión de que papá no está del todo contento con nuestro compromiso —continuó Rosamond, hablando casi en un susurro—; y anoche dijo que tenía que hablar sin falta contigo y decirte que hay que renunciar a él.

—¿Renunciarías tú? —dijo Lydgate con gran energía, casi enfadado.

—Nunca renuncio a nada que haya decidido hacer —dijo Rosamond, recobrando la calma al sentir el toque en una fibra suya muy sensible.

—¡Que Dios te bendiga! —dijo Lydgate, besándola de nuevo. Aquella determinación para las cosas importantes era adorable—. Ya es demasiado tarde —continuó— para que tu padre diga que debemos renunciar a nuestro compromiso. Eres mayor de edad, y yo te reclamo como mía. Si ha pasado algo que te hace desgraciada… tenemos una razón más para apresurar la boda.

Un inconfundible brillo de placer apareció en aquellos ojos azules que se miraron en los suyos, y su resplandor pareció iluminar todo el futuro de Lydgate con un suave resplandor. La felicidad ideal (del tipo descrito en *Las mil y una noches*, en la que se nos invita a pasar del trabajo y las discordias de la calle a un paraíso donde todo se nos da y nada se nos exige) parecía estar al alcance de su mano al cabo de unas

cuantas semanas, poco más o menos.

—¿Por qué tendríamos que retrasarla? —dijo Lydgate, con ardiente insistencia—. Ya tengo la casa: todo lo demás puede estar listo muy pronto, ¿no es cierto? No creo que te importe el ajuar. Siempre se puede comprar después.

—¡Qué ideas tan originales tenéis los hombres inteligentes! —dijo Rosamond, con la risa marcándole los hoyuelos más de lo habitual ante aquella divertida incongruencia—. Es la primera vez que oigo hablar de comprar el ajuar después de la boda.

—¿No querrás decir que insistes en hacerme esperar meses sin otro motivo que el ajuar? —dijo Lydgate, medio convencido de que Rosamond estaba atormentándolo en broma y medio temiendo que la acobardara un matrimonio rápido—. Recuerda que tenemos puesta la mirada en una felicidad superior incluso a la que ahora disfrutamos: estar continuamente juntos, independientes de los demás, y organizando nuestra vida como deseemos. Vamos, querida, dime que necesitas muy poco tiempo para ser completamente mía.

Había un tono de súplica en las palabras de Lydgate, como si temiera que Rosamond fuera a ofenderle con retrasos fantásticos. La señorita Vincy también se puso seria, y hasta un poquito meditabunda; de hecho repasaba complicados detalles de puntillas, medias y dobladillos en la ropa interior para poder dar una respuesta que fuese por lo menos aproximada.

—Seis semanas serían suficientes… Di que sí, Rosamond —insistió Lydgate, soltándole las manos, para pasarle suavemente el brazo alrededor del talle.

La señorita Vincy se ahuecó el cabello con una mano diminuta al mismo tiempo que daba a su cuello una inclinación reflexiva; luego dijo con gran seriedad:

—Habrá que preparar también la ropa de la casa y comprar los muebles. Aunque mamá podría ocuparse de eso mientras estemos fuera.

—Claro que sí. Estaremos fuera una semana, más o menos.

—¡No, no, más tiempo! —dijo Rosamond con gran viveza. Repasaba sus trajes de noche para la visita a sir Godwin Lydgate, en la que llevaba mucho tiempo pensando en secreto como una maravillosa manera de emplear por lo menos una cuarta parte de su luna de miel, aunque eso significara retrasar su presentación al tío de Tertius que era doctor en teología (también, aunque fuese más sobria, un agradable tipo de jerarquía social, si estaba apoyada en la sangre). La señorita Vincy contempló a su enamorado con algo de sorpresa y reconvención, y Lydgate entendió al instante que ella tal vez quería alargar el dulce tiempo de su soledad a dos.

—Lo que tú desees, querida, en cuanto fijemos el día. Hemos de tomar un rumbo decidido y poner término a esas molestias que quizá estás sufriendo. ¡Seis semanas!… Estoy seguro de que es tiempo suficiente.

—Podría desde luego acelerar el trabajo —dijo Rosamond—. ¿Querrás tú, entonces, decírselo a papá?… aunque quizá sea mejor escribirle. —Rosamond se sonrojó y lo miró como las flores de jardín nos miran cuando avanzamos alegremente entre ellas a la luz singular del atardecer: ¿no es cierto que hay un alma que se resiste a toda expresión, mitad ninfa, mitad niña, en esos pétalos delicados que brillan y respiran alrededor de los centros de color más intensos?

Lydgate tocó con los labios la oreja de Rosamond y un poco del cuello más abajo, y los dos se quedaron completamente inmóviles durante muchos minutos y el tiempo se deslizó junto a ellos como un arroyo cantarín besado por los rayos de sol. Rosamond pensó que nadie podía estar más enamorado que ella; y Lydgate pensó que después de todas sus terribles equivocaciones y absurda credulidad había hallado la feminidad perfecta; sintió que ya estaba recibiendo el hálito del afecto matrimonial más exquisito tal como podía otorgárselo una criatura maravillosa que veneraba sus elevadas meditaciones e importantes trabajos y que nunca los obstaculizaría; una criatura maravillosa que crearía orden en la casa y en las cuentas con magia silenciosa, pero manteniendo los dedos dispuestos para tocar el laúd y transformar la vida en aventura romántica en cualquier momento; una criatura maravillosa instruida hasta el verdadero límite femenino y ni un milímetro más allá… dócil, por tanto, y dispuesta a llevar a cabo las órdenes que le llegaran desde el otro lado de aquel límite. Quedaba ahora más claro que nunca que su proyecto de seguir soltero había sido un error: el matrimonio no sería obstáculo, sino ocasión de progreso. Y al darse la coincidencia de que al día siguiente tuvo que acompañar a un paciente a Brassing, vio un servicio de mesa que le pareció tan indicado que lo compró al instante. Ahorraba tiempo hacer aquellas cosas cuando uno pensaba en ellas y a Lydgate le molestaba mucho una vajilla fea. El servicio de mesa en cuestión era caro, pero quizá fuera una característica inherente a su naturaleza. Sin duda amueblar una casa era caro; pero también es cierto que solo se hacía una vez.

—Debe de ser muy bonito —dijo la señora Vincy, cuando Lydgate mencionó la compra añadiendo

algunos toques descriptivos—. Exactamente lo que Rosy debe tener. ¡Pediré al cielo que nadie lo rompa!

—Hay que contratar criados que no rompan las cosas —dijo Lydgate. (Aquello era, sin duda, razonar con una visión imperfecta del orden de causas y efectos. Si bien en aquel período no había ningún tipo de razonamiento que no estuviera más o menos sancionado por hombres de ciencia).

Por supuesto a mamá se la podía informar de todo sin retraso, ya que siempre adoptaba puntos de vista optimistas y, por ser una esposa feliz, difícilmente cabía en ella otro sentimiento que no fuera de orgullo al pensar en la boda de su hija. Pero Rosamond tenía buenas razones para sugerir a Lydgate la conveniencia de apelar a su papá por escrito, y preparó la llegada de la carta yendo a pie con el señor Vincy al almacén a la mañana siguiente y contándole por el camino que el señor Lydgate quería casarse pronto.

—Tonterías, querida —dijo el señor Vincy—. ¿Con qué cuenta para ello? Sería mucho mejor que renunciaras a ese compromiso. Ya te lo he dicho con toda claridad antes de ahora. ¿Para qué te hemos dado una educación tan buena, si vas a terminar casándote con un hombre pobre? Resulta muy triste para un padre ver una cosa así.

—El señor Lydgate no es pobre, papá. Le compró al señor Peacock el derecho a atender a su antigua clientela y, según dice, eso produce ochocientas o novecientas libras al año.

—¡Otra tontería! ¿Cómo se puede comprar una clientela? Lo mismo podría haber comprado las golondrinas del año que viene. Se le irá todo de entre las manos.

—Va a ser al contrario, papá; ya verás cómo tiene cada vez más pacientes. Ya le han llamado los Chettam y los Casaubon.

—Espero que sepa que no voy a darle nada… con el chasco en el asunto de Fred, el Parlamento a punto de disolverse, los obreros rompiendo maquinaria por todas partes y una elección a la vuelta de la esquina…

—Pero, ¡papá!, ¿qué puede tener que ver todo eso con mi boda?

—¡Ya lo creo que tiene que ver! Puede que nos arruinemos todos por lo que a mí se me alcanza… ¡con el país en el estado en que se encuentra! Algunos dicen que es el fin del mundo, y que me ahorquen si no pienso que tienen razón. En cualquier caso, no es momento para que yo retire dinero de mi negocio, y me gustaría que Lydgate lo supiera.

—Estoy segura de que no espera nada, papá. Y tiene parientes de mucha alcurnia: no hay duda de que prosperará de una forma u otra. Se dedica a los descubrimientos científicos.

El señor Vincy guardó silencio.

—No puedo renunciar a mi única perspectiva de felicidad, papá; el señor Lydgate es un caballero. Nunca podría querer a alguien que no fuese un perfecto caballero. No te gustaría que enfermara de tisis, como le pasó a Arabella Hawley. Y sabes que nunca me vuelvo atrás cuando decido algo.

De nuevo su papá guardó silencio.

—Prométeme que darás tu consentimiento a lo que queremos. Nunca renunciaremos el uno al otro; y recuerda que tú siempre te has opuesto a los noviazgos largos y a los matrimonios tardíos.

Hubo algunas exhortaciones más de este tipo, hasta que el señor Vincy dijo:

—Bueno, bueno, chiquilla, primero tiene que escribirme para que yo pueda contestarle.

Rosamond tuvo entonces la certeza de que había ganado la partida.

La respuesta del señor Vincy consistió sobre todo en una petición de que Lydgate se hiciera un seguro de vida, demanda concedida de inmediato. Se trataba de una idea en extremo tranquilizadora suponiendo que Lydgate muriera, pero, mientras tanto, no se la podía considerar autosuficiente. Pareció, sin embargo, facilitar todo lo relativo al matrimonio de Rosamond; y las compras necesarias se llevaron a cabo con gran ánimo, aunque con consideraciones llenas de prudencia. Una novia (que se dispone a visitar a un baronet) debe tener unos cuantos pañuelos de primera calidad; después de la media docena absolutamente necesaria, Rosamond renunció en los demás a los bordados más lujosos y a los mejores encajes de Valenciennes. También Lydgate, al descubrir que sus ochocientas libras de capital habían disminuido mucho desde su llegada a Middlemarch, contuvo sus deseos de adquirir algunos cubiertos de un modelo antiguo que le fueron mostrados en el establecimiento de Kibble, en Brassing, cuando fue a comprar tenedores y cucharas. Era demasiado orgulloso para actuar como si supusiera que el señor Vincy adelantaría dinero para la compra de los muebles; y aunque, como no sería necesario abonarlo todo inmediatamente, algunas de las facturas quedarían pendientes, el joven médico no malgastó tiempo haciendo conjeturas sobre cuánto le daría su suegro en forma de dote para hacer que el pago le resultara más fácil. Lydgate no iba a hacer nada fuera de lo normal, pero era preciso adquirir las cosas necesarias, y sería antieconómico comprarlas de mala calidad. Todo aquello era secundario. Lydgate preveía que la ciencia y su profesión eran los únicos objetos que reclamaban su entusiasta perseverancia; y no lograba imaginarse haciéndolo en un hogar como el de Wrench: todas las puertas abiertas, los hules gastados, los niños con delantales manchados, y almuerzos que

dejaban un rastro de huesos, cuchillos de mango negro y platos con falsas decoraciones chinas. Wrench, sin embargo, había tenido una desventurada esposa terriblemente apática que dentro de la casa se transformaba en una momia con ayuda de un chal de grandes proporciones; y sin duda empezó ya con un dispositivo doméstico totalmente erróneo.

Rosamond, por su parte, estaba muy ocupada haciendo conjeturas, si bien su rápida capacidad imitativa le advertía de los peligros a que se exponía si las manifestaba con excesiva crudeza.

—Me gustaría mucho conocer a tu familia —dijo la señorita Vincy un día, cuando estaban hablando del viaje de novios—. Quizá podamos hacer un recorrido que nos permita visitarlos a la vuelta. ¿A cuál prefieres de entre tus tíos?

—Creo que a mi tío Godwin. Es un viejo con muy buen carácter.

—Estabas siempre en su casa de Quallingham cuando eras muchacho, ¿no es cierto? Me gustaría mucho ver el sitio y todas las cosas que te eran familiares. ¿Sabe que vas a casarte?

—No —dijo Lydgate distraídamente, girando sobre la silla y pasándose la mano por el pelo.

—Haz el favor de comunicárselo, sobrino perverso y desagradecido. Quizá te pida que me lleves contigo a Quallingham; y luego tú podrías enseñarme la finca, y yo te imaginaría allí cuando eras muchacho. Recuerda que tú me ves en mi propio hogar, tal como he vivido desde niña. No es justo que yo sepa tan poco de tus primeros años. Pero quizá te avergüences un poco de mí. No me acordaba de eso.

Lydgate le sonrió con ternura, y aceptó sin reservas la idea de que el placer de exhibir a una novia tan encantadora justificaba ciertas molestias. Y ahora que pensaba en ello, le gustaría ver con Rosamond el escenario de su adolescencia.

—Le escribiré, de acuerdo. Pero mis primos son muy aburridos.

A Rosamond le pareció magnífico que fuera posible hablar con tanto desdén de la familia de un baronet y sintió gran satisfacción ante la perspectiva de llegar a conceptuarlos de la misma manera en el futuro.

Aunque mamá Vincy estuvo a punto de estropearlo todo, uno o dos días después, diciendo:

—Espero que sir Godwin, su tío de usted, no tenga en menos a Rosy, señor Lydgate. Creo que debería dar una muestra de su generosidad. Mil o dos mil libras no deben significar nada para un baronet.

—¡Mamá! —dijo Rosamond, ruborizándose intensamente; y Lydgate se compadeció tanto de ella que guardó silencio y fue al otro extremo de la habitación para examinar un grabado con curiosidad, como si hubiera estado distraído. A la señora Vincy se la reconvino después, y se mostró tan dócil como de costumbre. Pero Rosamond pensó que si fuera posible convencer a alguno de aquellos aristocráticos primos tan aburridos para que visitara Middlemarch, verían muchas cosas de su familia que les desagradarían. De ahí la conveniencia de que, a la larga, Lydgate encontrara un puesto de primera clase en otra ciudad; y esto no debía presentar grandes dificultades tratándose de un hombre capaz de hacer descubrimientos científicos, y con un tío que era miembro de la nobleza. Lydgate, como el lector ya se imagina, le había hablado con fervor a Rosamond de sus esperanzas de un elevado destino profesional, y le pareció delicioso que le escuchase una criatura dispuesta a proporcionarle el dulce apoyo de un afecto plenamente satisfactorio… belleza… reposo: la misma ayuda que nuestros pensamientos reciben del cielo de verano y de los prados ribeteados de flores.

Lydgate daba mucha importancia a las diferencias psicológicas entre lo que, por mor de la variedad, llamaré ánsar macho y ganso hembra: especialmente a la innata docilidad de la segunda, que se corresponde con la fortaleza del primero.

Capítulo XXXVII

Triplemente feliz quien está tan segura
de sí misma, y tiene tan firme el corazón,
que no se deja tentar por bienes posibles
ni teme la incertidumbre del azar,
sino que, como un barco muy marinero, corta con fuerza
las olas embravecidas, y mantiene firme el rumbo;
en modo alguno la aparta de él la tempestad,
ni tampoco el falso placer de un clima más benigno.
Tal seguridad en sí misma no ha de temer el rencor
de enemigos envidiosos; ni buscar el favor de los amigos;
sino que con el apoyo de su fuerza perseverante
no se desvía ni hacia unos ni hacia otros.
Feliz la mujer que con tanto reposo descansa
pero aún más feliz aquel a quien ama una mujer así.

SPENCER

La duda apuntada por el señor Vincy sobre si, una vez muerto Jorge IV, disuelto el Parlamento, Wellington y Peel en el punto más bajo de su popularidad y el nuevo rey pidiendo disculpas, lo que se avecinaba eran tan solo elecciones generales o más bien el fin del mundo, suponía únicamente un débil ejemplo de las incertidumbres de la opinión en provincias durante aquel período. Con las luces mortecinas de las casas rurales, ¿cómo era posible que los hombres vieran cuáles eran sus ideas en medio de la confusión de un gobierno conservador aprobando medidas liberales, de los nobles y electores conservadores preocupados de elegir liberales antes que a los amigos de los ministros apóstatas, y de las indignadas solicitudes de remedios que parecían tener una relación bien remota con sus intereses y que resultaban sospechosas porque las defendían vecinos indeseables? Los lectores de periódicos de Middlemarch se encontraban en una posición anómala: durante la agitación con motivo de la cuestión católica, muchos habían dejado de comprar el *Pionero* —que tenía como lema una frase de Charles James Fox[89] y estaba subido en el carro del progreso— cuando se decantó por Peel en el conflicto de los papistas, mezclando así su liberalismo con la tolerancia hacia el jesuitismo y hacia Baal; pero no estaban nada satisfechos con la *Trompeta* que —después de sus bocinazos contra Roma y dada la general flojera de la opinión pública (nadie sabía quién iba a apoyar a quién)— se había quedado sin fuerzas para soplar.

Era un momento, según un destacado artículo del *Pionero*, en el que las necesidades evidentes del país quizá pudieran contrarrestar la resistencia a la acción pública de hombres que, debido a una larga experiencia, habían adquirido amplitud y también capacidad de análisis, decisión a la hora de juzgar al mismo tiempo que tolerancia, y desapasionamiento al igual que energía: todas las cualidades que, de hecho, según la melancólica experiencia de la humanidad, han estado menos dispuestas a compartir alojamiento.

Al señor Hackbutt, cuya palabra fácil se alargaba en aquel tiempo aún más de lo habitual, creando gran incertidumbre sobre su dirección definitiva, se le oyó decir en el despacho del señor Hawley que el artículo en cuestión «emanaba» de Brooke de Tipton Grange, y que, unos meses atrás, Brooke había comprado el *Pionero* en secreto.

—Aquí hay gato encerrado —dijo el señor Hawley—. Brooke tiene ahora el capricho de convertirse en un hombre popular, después de ir de un lado para otro como perro sin amo. Peor para él. Llevo algún

tiempo observándolo: vamos a hacerle sudar la gota gorda. Es un pésimo terrateniente. ¿Qué razones tiene uno de los notables del condado para venir a mendigar los favores de un grupo de ciudadanos sin importancia? En cuanto a su periódico, solo espero que sea él quien lo redacte, porque en ese caso merecerá la pena el dinero que paguemos por él.

—Tengo entendido que cuenta con un joven muy inteligente para dirigirlo, capaz de escribir brillantes artículos de fondo, comparables a los mejores de los periódicos de Londres. Y piensa adoptar una postura muy favorable a la reforma.

—Más le valdría que reformase su registro de alquileres. Es un tacaño de tomo y lomo, y todas las casas de sus propiedades están a punto de venirse abajo. Imagino que ese joven será algún pájaro de cuenta venido de Londres.

—Se apellida Ladislaw. Dicen que es de origen extranjero.

—Conozco a los de su calaña —respondió el señor Hawley—; será un espía. Empezará con florituras sobre los derechos del hombre y acabará asesinando a una mujer de vida fácil. Es su estilo.

—Tiene usted que conceder que existen abusos —dijo el señor Hackbutt, previendo alguna desavenencia política con el abogado de su familia—. Yo, por mi parte, nunca apoyaré puntos de vista radicales… De hecho estoy de acuerdo en todo con Huskisson[90], pero no puedo cerrar los ojos a la consideración de que la falta de representantes de grandes ciudades…

—¡Al diablo con las ciudades importantes! —dijo el señor Hawley, a quien impacientaban las exposiciones de principios—. Conozco demasiado bien las elecciones de Middlemarch. Si acaban con todos los distritos controlados por una sola familia y llevan a la Cámara de los Comunes a todas las ciudades que están creciendo no habrán hecho más que aumentar los gastos que hay que realizar para entrar en el Parlamento. Me apoyo en hechos para decir lo que digo.

La irritación del señor Hawley ante la idea de que el *Pionero* fuese dirigido por un espía y de que Brooke se interesara activamente por la política —como si una tortuga que deambula por el jardín sin rumbo fijo sacara la cabecita con aire ambicioso y se volviera agresiva—, apenas podía compararse con el disgusto que sentían algunos de los miembros de la familia del señor Brooke. Los síntomas habían ido apareciendo gradualmente, como cuando descubrimos que un vecino ha instalado en su casa una molesta manufactura que seguirá para siempre bajo nuestras narices sin remedio legal. El *Pionero* se compró en secreto antes incluso de la llegada de Will Ladislaw, al presentarse la deseada oportunidad, gracias a la buena disposición de su dueño, deseoso de desprenderse de una propiedad valiosa que nada producía; y en el intervalo desde que el señor Brooke redactó la invitación, aquellas ideas germinales de lograr que su espíritu tuviera algún efecto sobre el mundo en general, ideas que habían encontrado hasta aquel momento ciertos obstáculos, empezaron a brotar a escondidas.

El desarrollo de tales ideas se veía muy favorecido por las satisfacciones que le proporcionaba su huésped, superiores incluso a las que había imaginado. Porque parecía que Will no solo se sentía a gusto con todos aquellos temas artísticos y literarios por los que el señor Brooke se había interesado en el pasado, sino que estaba dispuesto a captar todos los aspectos de la situación política y a enfocarlos con la amplitud de espíritu que, ayudada por una memoria adecuada, proporciona la posibilidad de hacer citas y de lograr una gran eficacia en el tratamiento de esas cuestiones.

—Me hace pensar en Shelley, ya me entiende —dijo el señor Brooke cuando se le presentó la oportunidad y pensando dar una satisfacción al señor Casaubon—. No me refiero a nada censurable… falta de disciplina o ateísmo u otra cosa por el estilo, ya me entiende… Estoy seguro de que los sentimientos de Ladislaw son buenos en todos los sentidos… De hecho, estuvimos hablando mucho tiempo anoche. Tiene idéntico entusiasmo por la libertad, por la emancipación… una cosa espléndida guiándola bien, claro está. Creo que seré capaz de encaminarlo en la buena dirección; y aún estoy más satisfecho porque se trata de un pariente suyo, Casaubon.

Si la buena dirección implicaba algo más preciso que el resto de las palabras del señor Brooke, el señor Casaubon confiaba en silencio en que se refiriera a alguna ocupación a la mayor distancia posible de Lowick. Will le desagradaba ya mientras estuvo ayudándolo, pero aún le desagradaba más ahora que había renunciado a su ayuda. Eso es lo que sucede cuando somos celosos por naturaleza; si nuestros talentos pertenecen básicamente al género de los que requieren laboriosas excavaciones, es muy posible que nuestro primo, que recolecta el polen de flor en flor (y de quien tenemos poderosas razones para desconfiar) nos desprecie en secreto, y así cualquiera que manifieste admiración por él nos estará criticando de manera indirecta. Gracias a los deseos de rectitud que alberga nuestra alma, estamos por encima de la mezquindad de hacerle daño: más bien respondemos a sus derechos con beneficios positivos; y extenderle cheques, signo de una superioridad que debe reconocer, dulcifica un tanto nuestra amargura. Ahora el señor Casaubon se

había visto privado de aquella superioridad (que quedaba reducida a un simple recuerdo) de manera repentina y caprichosa. Su antipatía por Will no brotaba de los celos normales de un marido de edad avanzada: era algo más profundo, enraizado en las aspiraciones y en las desilusiones de toda una vida; pero Dorothea, ahora que estaba presente… Dorothea, en su calidad de esposa joven que había manifestado también una ofensiva capacidad para la crítica, daba sin duda mayor peso a una intranquilidad que antes había sido más imprecisa.

Will Ladislaw sentía por su parte que su aversión florecía a expensas de su gratitud y pasaba mucho tiempo en monólogo interior justificando aquella aversión. Casaubon le odiaba: de eso estaba convencido; durante su primera visita pudo advertir un rencor en la boca y un veneno en la mirada capaces casi de justificar una declaración de guerra olvidando anteriores beneficios. Estaba muy obligado a Casaubon en el pasado, pero, a decir verdad, su matrimonio con una mujer como Dorothea creaba un contrapeso frente a la obligación. Era una cuestión de saber si la gratitud por el bien propio no debe dar paso a la indignación por el mal contra otra persona. Y Casaubon había perjudicado a Dorothea casándose con ella. Un hombre está obligado a conocerse mejor y, si decide cultivar grises huesos quebradizos en una cueva, no tiene por qué atraer con engaños a una muchacha para que sea su compañera. «Es el más horrible de los sacrificios de vírgenes», decía Will; y se pintaba a sí mismo las tribulaciones interiores de Dorothea como si hubiese estado escribiendo una elegía al estilo griego. No la perdería nunca de vista: la vigilaría… Si renunciaba a todo lo demás en la vida podría cuidar de ella y Dorothea sabría que contaba con un esclavo en el mundo. Will tenía —para usar la frase de sir Thomas Browne— una «prodigalidad apasionada» tanto al hablar de sí mismo como de otros. La verdad pura y simple era que por entonces nada le estimulaba tanto como la presencia de Dorothea.

Le faltaban, sin embargo, los estímulos oficiales, porque nadie había invitado a Will a que fuese a Lowick. El señor Brooke, claro está, confiando en proporcionar a Casaubon todas las diversiones que el pobre erudito estaba demasiado absorto para imaginar, lo llevó consigo en varias ocasiones (sin descuidar entre tanto presentarlo siempre en otros sitios como «un joven pariente de Casaubon»). Y aunque Will no había visto a Dorothea a solas, sus encuentros bastaron para que ella renovara su primitivo sentimiento de joven camaradería con alguien que era más inteligente y parecía, sin embargo, dispuesto a ceder. Antes de casarse, la pobre Dorothea no encontró nunca mucho sitio en otros espíritus para las cosas que tenía más ganas de decir; y, como ya sabemos, no había disfrutado tanto como esperaba de los superiores conocimientos de su marido. Si hablaba de algo al señor Casaubon con vivo interés, él la escuchaba con el mismo aire de infinita paciencia que si le estuviese repitiendo una cita del *Delectus*[91] con el que tan familiarizado estaba desde sus años mozos, y en ocasiones le indicaba fríamente las antiguas sectas o personajes que habían sostenido ideas similares, como si ya existiera demasiado material en depósito de aquella especie; otras veces le informaba de que se había equivocado y reafirmaba lo que su pregunta había puesto en duda.

Will Ladislaw siempre parecía ver en lo que ella decía más de lo que la misma Dorotea era capaz de descubrir. La señora Casaubon no era nada vanidosa, pero tenía la ardiente necesidad femenina de gobernar caritativamente, dando alegría a otra alma. De aquí que la simple oportunidad de ver a Will de cuando en cuando era como un ventanuco abierto en el muro de su prisión, que le permitiría contemplar por un momento el aire soleado; y este placer empezó a anular su primer desasosiego por lo que su marido pudiera pensar de la presencia de Will como huésped de su tío. En aquel asunto el señor Casaubon había permanecido mudo.

Will quería hablar con Dorothea a solas y se impacientaba ante la lentitud de los acontecimientos. Por muy insignificante que fuera la comunicación terrestre entre Dante y Beatriz o entre Petrarca y Laura, el tiempo cambia la proporción de las cosas y en una época posterior es preferible tener menos sonetos y más conversación. La necesidad disculpaba las estratagemas, pero las estratagemas quedaban limitadas por el miedo a ofender a Dorothea. Finalmente, Will descubrió que quería hacer un apunte en Lowick; y una mañana en que el señor Brooke tenía que utilizar la carretera de Lowick para ir a la capital del condado, pidió que se le dejara con su cuaderno y su silla de tijera en el pueblo y, sin anunciarse en la mansión, se dispuso a dibujar en un sitio que le permitiría ver a Dorothea si salía a pasear… porque Will sabía que acostumbraba hacerlo durante una hora todas las mañanas.

La estratagema falló a causa del tiempo. Las nubes se congregaron con celeridad traicionera, la lluvia empezó a caer y Will se vio obligado a buscar refugio en la casa. Su intención, apoyándose en la fuerza del parentesco, era entrar en el salón y esperar allí, sin ser anunciado, a que pasara el aguacero; y, al ver a su viejo conocido el mayordomo en el vestíbulo, le dijo:

—No diga a nadie que estoy aquí, Pratt; esperaré hasta la hora del almuerzo; ya sé que al señor

Casaubon no le gusta que se le moleste cuando está en la biblioteca.

—El amo ha salido, señor; en la biblioteca solo está la señora Casaubon. Será mejor que vaya a avisarle —respondió Pratt, un hombre de mejillas encarnadas, aficionado a conversar con Tantripp y a mostrarse de acuerdo con ella en que la señora debía de aburrirse mucho.

—Bueno, muy bien; esta maldita lluvia me ha impedido dibujar —dijo Will, sintiéndose tan feliz que fue capaz de fingir indiferencia con gran facilidad.

Un minuto después estaba en la biblioteca y Dorothea lo reconoció con su dulce sonrisa llena de espontaneidad.

—El señor Casaubon ha ido a ver al arcediano —dijo de inmediato—. No sé si volverá antes de la cena. No estaba seguro de cuánto tiempo le duraría la visita. ¿Tenía usted que decirle algo especial?

—No; he venido a hacer unos apuntes, pero la lluvia me ha obligado a refugiarme. De lo contrario no la hubiese molestado tan pronto. Suponía que el señor Casaubon estaba en casa y sé que no le gustan las interrupciones a esta hora.

—Estoy en deuda con la lluvia, entonces. Me alegro mucho de verle. —Dorothea pronunció aquellas frases convencionales con toda la sinceridad de un niño desdichado a quien se va a visitar al colegio.

—En realidad he venido por la posibilidad de verla a solas —dijo Will, misteriosamente obligado a ser tan sincero como ella. No había tiempo para preguntarse a sí mismo: ¿por qué no?—. Quería hablar de muchas cosas, como hicimos en Roma. Nunca es igual cuando hay otras personas.

—No —dijo Dorothea, mostrando en el tono de voz la plenitud de su asentimiento—. Siéntese. —Ella se instaló en una oscura otomana, con los libros de color marrón a su espalda, dando la impresión, con su sencillo vestido de fina lana blanca, sin otro adorno que el anillo de casada, de haber hecho voto de ser distinta a todas las mujeres; y Will se sentó frente a ella a dos metros de distancia, la luz cayendo sobre sus brillantes rizos y su perfil delicado, aunque un tanto insolente, con las curvas desafiantes de labios y barbilla. Se miraron el uno al otro como si fueran dos flores que se hubiesen abierto allí y entonces. Dorothea olvidó la misteriosa irritación de su marido contra Will; para sus labios sedientos era como agua fresca hablar sin miedo con la única persona dispuesta a escucharla con interés que había encontrado; y es que mirar hacia atrás entre velos de tristeza exagera los consuelos del pasado.

—He pensado con frecuencia que me gustaría hablar con usted de nuevo —dijo ella en seguida—. Resulta extraño pensar en las muchas cosas que le he dicho.

—Las recuerdo todas —dijo Will, sintiendo el inexplicable contento de estar en presencia de una criatura merecedora de ser amada con total entrega. Creo que también en aquel instante sus sentimientos alcanzaron la perfección, porque los mortales tenemos nuestros momentos divinos, cuando el amor se satisface con la integridad del objeto amado.

—Me he esforzado mucho en aprender desde que estuvimos en Roma —dijo Dorothea—. Leo algo de latín y estoy empezando a entender un poquito de griego. Ahora soy capaz de ayudar mejor al señor Casaubon. Encuentro las referencias que necesita y evito de muchas maneras que se canse demasiado la vista. Es muy difícil ser una persona ilustrada; parece como si los seres humanos se gastaran en el camino hacia las grandes ideas y no llegaran nunca a disfrutar con ellas porque están agotados.

—Si un hombre tiene capacidad para grandes ideas, es muy probable que las alcance antes de llegar a la decrepitud —dijo Will, con celeridad irrefrenable. Pero en determinadas cosas Dorothea era tan rápida como él, y al ver que cambiaba su expresión, añadió inmediatamente—: Aunque también es cierto que a veces las mejores cabezas se han tenido que fatigar en exceso para desarrollar sus ideas.

—Hace usted bien en corregirme —dijo Dorothea—, porque me he expresado mal. Debiera haber dicho que quienes tienen grandes ideas se desgastan mucho desarrollándolas. Es una cosa que antes me preocupaba, incluso cuando era muy pequeña; y siempre me pareció que el mejor uso que podía dar a mi vida era ayudar a alguien a que realizara grandes obras, para que su carga fuese más ligera.

Dorothea se vio impulsada a contar aquel pequeño fragmento de su autobiografía sin sentir por ello que estuviera haciendo una revelación, aunque nunca le había dicho a Will nada que arrojara una luz tan intensa sobre su matrimonio. Él no se encogió de hombros; y por faltarle aquella especie de desahogo muscular, pensó aún con mayor irritación en hermosos labios besando santas calaveras y otras vaciedades eclesiásticas igualmente entronizadas. También tuvo que estar atento para que sus palabras no delataran aquella idea.

—Es fácil que lleve usted esa ayuda demasiado lejos —dijo—, y llegue a fatigarse en exceso. ¿No pasa demasiado tiempo encerrada? La encuentro más pálida. Sería mejor que el señor Casaubon contratara a un secretario; no tendría problemas para hallar a un hombre que le hiciera la mitad del trabajo. Le supondría un mayor ahorro de tiempo y usted solo necesitaría ayudarlo en cosas más llevaderas.

—¿Cómo puede pensar una cosa así? —dijo ella con tono de sincera reconvención—. No sería feliz sin ayudar a mi marido. ¿En qué podría ocuparme? En Lowick no hay nadie a quien hacer el bien. Lo único que deseo es ayudarlo más. Y a él no le agrada la idea de un secretario, así que haga el favor de no volver a mencionarlo.

—Por supuesto que no, ahora que sé cómo piensa usted. Pero tanto al señor Brooke como a sir James Chettam les he oído expresar el mismo deseo.

—Sí —dijo Dorothea—, pero ellos no entienden… Quieren que me distraiga montando a caballo y que cambie el jardín y haga construir nuevos invernaderos para llenar mis días. Creí que usted entendería que es posible tener otras necesidades —añadió, bastante molesta—; además, el señor Casaubon no quiere saber nada de un secretario.

—Mi equivocación es disculpable —dijo Will—. Hace algún tiempo el señor Casaubon hablaba como si le interesara tenerlo. De hecho llegó a esbozar la posibilidad de que yo ocupara el puesto. Pero resulté no ser… suficientemente bueno para ese trabajo.

Dorothea estaba procurando extraer de aquello una excusa para la evidente antipatía de su marido, cuando comentó, con una sonrisa festiva:

—Le faltaba la necesaria perseverancia.

—No —dijo Will, agitando la cabeza hacia atrás, un poco a la manera de los caballos de raza. Y luego, al empujarle el viejo demonio irritable a dar otro buen pellizco a la endeble gloria del pobre señor Casaubon, continuó—: Y he visto desde entonces que al señor Casaubon no le gusta que nadie tenga acceso a su trabajo y sepa a fondo qué es lo que está haciendo. Tiene demasiadas dudas… Se siente demasiado poco seguro de sí mismo. Puede que yo no sirva para mucho, pero le desagrado porque no estoy de acuerdo con él.

A Will no le faltaban deseos de ser siempre generoso, pero nuestra lengua es un gatillo que muchas veces se aprieta antes de que las buenas intenciones abstractas entren en juego. Y resultaba del todo intolerable que Dorothea no tuviese una explicación objetiva de la antipatía que Casaubon sentía por él. Sin embargo, después de hablar se sintió bastante preocupado por el posible efecto de sus palabras.

Dorothea permaneció extrañamente silenciosa, sin indignarse de inmediato como hiciera en Roma en una ocasión similar. Y tenía razones muy hondas para ello. Ya no luchaba contra la percepción de los hechos, sino que trataba de amoldarse a ellos para lograr una visión más clara; y ahora, cuando, sin apartar la vista, contemplaba el fracaso de su marido y sobre todo su posible convencimiento del propio fracaso le parecía estar viendo el camino donde el deber se convierte en ternura. La indiscreción de Will podría haber sido recibida con mayor severidad si la antipatía de su marido, que a Dorothea le resultaba difícil de entender mientras no encontrara razones mejores, no lo hubiese recomendado ya a su clemencia.

No le respondió en seguida, y después de contemplar el suelo reflexivamente, dijo con cierta energía:

—Mi marido debe de haber superado su antipatía hacia usted en lo que a sus acciones se refiere; y eso es admirable.

—Sí; ha manifestado tener sentido de la justicia en cuestiones familiares. Fue una cosa abominable desheredar a mi abuela por lo que ellos llamaban una *mésalliance*, aunque nadie tenía nada en contra de su marido, excepto que era un refugiado polaco y que daba clases para ganarse la vida.

—¡Me gustaría saber más de su abuela! —dijo Dorothea—. Me pregunto cómo llevó el cambio de la riqueza a la pobreza; me pregunto si fue feliz con su marido. ¿Sabe usted mucho sobre ellos?

—No; tan solo que mi abuelo era un patriota… un hombre brillante… Hablaba muchos idiomas… Tenía talento para la música… Se ganaba la vida enseñando muchas cosas distintas. Los dos murieron bastante jóvenes. Y nunca supe mucho de mi padre, excepto lo que mi madre me contó; pero había heredado de mi abuelo la disposición para la música. Recuerdo su pausada forma de andar y sus manos largas de dedos finos; y me ha quedado el recuerdo de un día en que se hallaba enfermo en la cama y yo tenía mucha hambre y solo quedaba un trocito de pan.

—¡Ah, qué vida tan diferente de la mía! —dijo Dorothea con vivo interés, uniendo las manos sobre el regazo—. Siempre he tenido demasiado de todo. Explíqueme cómo fue… El señor Casaubon no podía conocerlo por entonces.

—No; pero mi padre se había dado a conocer al señor Casaubon y aquel fue el último día que pasé hambre. Mi padre murió poco después y mi madre y yo estuvimos bien atendidos a partir de entonces. El señor Casaubon siempre reconoció expresamente que era deber suyo ocuparse de nosotros en razón de la cruel injusticia cometida con la hermana de su madre. Esto que le cuento ya no es nuevo para usted.

En lo más hondo de su alma Will se percataba de que quería decirle a Dorothea lo que suponía una novedad incluso en su propia interpretación de los hechos: que el señor Casaubon nunca había hecho más

que pagar una deuda. Will era demasiado buena persona para que no le afectara la posibilidad de mostrarse desagradecido. Pero cuando la gratitud se ha convertido en materia de razonamiento, hay muchas maneras de escapar a sus ataduras.

—Sí lo es —respondió Dorothea—; el señor Casaubon ha evitado siempre detenerse a explicar sus acciones honorables. —No tenía la impresión de que la conducta de su marido hubiese perdido valor; pero aquella idea de que era muy elevada la parte que correspondía a la justicia en sus relaciones con Ladislaw hizo una honda impresión en su espíritu. Y después de una breve pausa, añadió—: Nunca me ha dicho que ayudó económicamente a su madre. ¿Vive aún?

—No; murió a causa de un accidente: una caída… hace cuatro años. Es curioso que también mi madre se alejara de su familia, pero no por su marido. Nunca quiso contarme nada sobre ellos, excepto que los dejó para ganarse la vida por su cuenta… trabajando en el teatro, de hecho. Era una mujer de ojos oscuros y pelo muy rizado que nunca daba la impresión de hacerse vieja. Ya ve usted que procedo de sangre rebelde por las dos ramas —terminó Will, sonriendo alegremente a Dorothea, mientras ella seguía mirando al frente con una expresión muy seria, como un niño que presencia un drama por vez primera.

También su rostro terminó iluminándose con una sonrisa mientras decía:

—Supongo que es esa su manera de disculparse por haber sido más bien rebelde; me refiero a los proyectos del señor Casaubon para usted. Recuerde que no ha hecho usted lo que él creía más conveniente. Y si le tiene antipatía… usted lo ha mencionado hace un momento… aunque yo hablaría más bien de una actitud dolida, debe usted tener en cuenta que las cosas le afectan más por el desgaste del estudio. Quizá —continuó, con un acento de súplica en la voz— mi tío no le haya explicado la gravedad de la dolencia del señor Casaubon. Sería mezquino que, estando bien de salud y con capacidad para soportar las adversidades, diéramos importancia a unas ofensas insignificantes de aquellos que cargan con el peso de la tribulación.

—Usted me hace ver que no debe ser así —dijo Will—. Nunca volveré a mencionar ese tema. —Había una dulzura en su tono de voz surgida del inefable contento que le producía advertir (cosa de la que Dorothea era apenas consciente) que su interlocutora se había colocado en la distante posición de la piedad y de la lealtad abstractas hacia su marido. Will estaba dispuesto a adorar aquella piedad y aquella lealtad, si Dorothea le asociaba con ella al manifestarlas—. A veces he sido realmente un ser perverso —continuó—, pero, si puedo evitarlo, nunca haré o diré nada que usted desapruebe.

—Eso está muy bien —dijo Dorothea, con otra sonrisa llena de sinceridad—. Así tendré un pequeño reino, en el que dictaré leyes. Pero supongo que se alejará usted pronto, escapando a mi autoridad. Se cansará en seguida de Tipton Grange.

—Ese es un asunto que quería mencionarle… una de las razones por las que deseaba hablar a solas con usted. El señor Brooke me ha propuesto que me quede. Ha comprado uno de los periódicos de Middlemarch y quiere que yo lo dirija y que le ayude también en otras cosas.

—¿No significaría eso sacrificar mejores perspectivas en otro sitio? —preguntó Dorothea.

—Quizá; siempre se me ha acusado de hacer muchos proyectos y de no dedicarme a nada en concreto. Esto, en cambio, es algo que me ofrecen. Si usted no desea que lo acepte, renunciaré a ello. De lo contrario prefiero quedarme en esta zona del país en lugar de ir a otro sitio. No tengo a nadie en ninguna parte.

—Me gustaría mucho que se quedara usted —dijo Dorothea al instante, con la misma simplicidad con que había hablado en Roma. No tenía en aquel momento ni la sombra de una razón para decir lo contrario.

—En ese caso, me quedaré —dijo Ladislaw, echando la cabeza hacia atrás; luego se levantó y se acercó a la ventana, como para ver si había cesado la lluvia.

Instantes después, Dorothea, de acuerdo con una costumbre que se reforzaba de continuo, empezó a pensar que su marido veía las cosas de otra manera y se ruborizó por la doble preocupación de haber manifestado algo que podía estar en oposición con sus sentimientos y de tener que sugerir tal oposición a Will. El rostro del joven no estaba vuelto hacia ella y eso hizo que le fuera más fácil decir:

—Mi opinión tiene muy poca importancia en ese asunto. Creo que debería usted guiarse por el señor Casaubon. He hablado pensando tan solo en mis sentimientos, que no tienen nada que ver con el problema real. Ahora se me ocurre… que quizá el señor Casaubon no considere prudente que acepte ese trabajo. ¿Por qué no le espera usted y habla de ello con él?

—Hoy no puedo quedarme —dijo Will, asustado ante la posibilidad de que el señor Casaubon entrara en la habitación—. Ha dejado de llover. Le dije al señor Brooke que no pasara a recogerme. Cruzaré andando por Halsell Common y veré los reflejos de la luz en la hierba húmeda. Es un espectáculo que me gusta.

Se acercó a ella para estrecharle la mano precipitadamente, deseando decir: «No le hable usted de esto al señor Casaubon», pero sin atreverse a hacerlo. No; estaba claro que no se atrevía, que no podía decirlo. Pedirle a Dorothea que fuese menos sencilla y directa sería como empañar el cristal por el que se quiere ver

la luz. Y existía siempre el otro gran temor: que él también quedara empañado o perdiera para siempre el brillo a sus ojos.

—Siento que no pueda quedarse —dijo Dorothea, con un toque de pesar en sus palabras, mientras se levantaba y le ofrecía la mano. Ella también pensaba en algo que no deseaba expresar: Will debería sin duda consultar al señor Casaubon sin perder tiempo, pero insistir en ello podía parecer una intromisión indebida.

De esta manera, solo se dijeron «Adiós» y Will, al abandonar la casa, se puso en camino atravesando los campos para no correr el riesgo de encontrarse con el coche del señor Casaubon, que, de todas formas, no se presentó en el portón hasta las cuatro: una hora poco conveniente para volver a casa; demasiado pronto para conseguir apoyo moral por el fastidio de tener que vestirse para la cena y demasiado tarde para vaciar la cabeza de las frívolas ceremonias y asuntos del día y lograr así prepararse para una buena inmersión en la seria tarea del estudio. En tales ocasiones, el señor Casaubon se sentaba en uno de los cómodos sillones de la biblioteca y permitía que Dorothea le leyera los periódicos de Londres, cerrando los ojos mientras tanto. Aquel día, sin embargo, renunció a ese solaz, haciendo notar que ya habían sido presentados a su atención demasiados asuntos públicos en una sola jornada, pero habló con más animación que de ordinario cuando Dorothea le preguntó si estaba muy cansado y añadió con el tono ceremonioso que nunca le abandonaba, incluso cuando hacía uso de la palabra sin chaleco ni corbata:

—He tenido hoy la satisfacción de encontrar a un viejo conocido, el doctor Spanning, y de ser elogiado por alguien que es sin duda merecedor de alabanzas. Ha hablado con mucha generosidad de mi última publicación sobre los misterios egipcios… utilizando, de hecho, términos que no estaría bien que yo repitiera. —Al pronunciar esta última frase, el señor Casaubon se inclinó sobre un brazo del sillón y balanceó la cabeza de arriba abajo, al parecer como desahogo muscular en lugar de la recapitulación que no hubiese sido decorosa.

—Me alegro mucho de que hayas tenido ese placer —dijo Dorothea, encantada de ver a su marido menos cansado que de costumbre a aquella hora—. Antes de que vinieras he estado lamentando que hayas tenido que salir hoy precisamente.

—¿Por qué, querida? —dijo el señor Casaubon echándose hacia atrás de nuevo.

—Porque el señor Ladislaw ha estado aquí; y ha hablado de una propuesta de mi tío sobre la que me gustaría conocer tu opinión. —Dorothea advirtió que a su marido le afectaba mucho aquel asunto. A pesar de su ignorancia de las cosas del mundo, tenía una vaga impresión de que el puesto ofrecido a Will no se hallaba de acuerdo con la posición social de su familia y de que el señor Casaubon debía ser consultado en un caso así. Su marido no habló, limitándose a hacer un gesto de asentimiento con la cabeza—. El bueno de mi tío, ya sabes, tiene muchos proyectos. Parece que ha comprado uno de los periódicos de Middlemarch y le ha pedido al señor Ladislaw que se quede a vivir en esta zona y dirija el periódico para él, además de ayudarle de otras maneras.

Dorothea, que miraba a su marido mientras hablaba, vio cómo parpadeaba primero y acababa cerrando los ojos, como para descansar la vista, mientras el gesto de su boca se hacía más tenso.

—¿Cuál es tu opinión? —añadió, con cierta timidez, después de una breve pausa.

—¿Ha venido el señor Ladislaw expresamente para pedir mi opinión? —dijo el señor Casaubon, entreabriendo los ojos y lanzando a su mujer una mirada penetrante. Dorothea se sentía muy incómoda acerca de aquel punto, pero no desvió la vista y su expresión solo se hizo un poco más seria.

—No —respondió de inmediato—; no dijo que viniera a pedir tu opinión. Pero al mencionar la propuesta esperaba sin duda que yo te hablara de ello.

El señor Casaubon guardó silencio.

—Se me ha ocurrido que quizá pudieras tener alguna objeción. También es cierto que un joven con tanto talento puede serle muy útil a mi tío… Podría ayudarle a hacer el bien con más eficacia. Y el señor Ladislaw desea tener alguna ocupación fija. Se le ha criticado, dice, por no haber hecho nada en ese sentido y le gustaría quedarse aquí porque no tiene a nadie en ningún otro sitio.

Dorothea pensó que aquella consideración podría ablandar a su marido. Sin embargo, el señor Casaubon no habló, y ella volvió en seguida al doctor Spanning y al desayuno con el arcediano. Pero no brillaba ya la luz del sol sobre aquellos temas de conversación.

A la mañana siguiente, sin que Dorothea se enterase, el señor Casaubon despachó la siguiente carta, encabezada con «Estimado señor Ladislaw» (anteriormente siempre se había dirigido a él como «Will»):

> La señora Casaubon me informa de que se le ha hecho un ofrecimiento que (según una deducción a todas luces justificada) está usted en cierta medida dispuesto aceptar y que implica su residencia en

esta zona ejerciendo unas funciones que, me creo con derecho a afirmar, afectan a mi posición de una forma que no solo hace natural y lógico que yo intervenga si esos efectos se contemplan bajo el prisma de unos legítimos sentimientos, sino que, si se los considera a la luz de mis propias responsabilidades, me obligan a notificarle de inmediato que su aceptación del ofrecimiento anteriormente citado sería en extremo ofensiva para mí. No creo que en este asunto me niegue el derecho al veto cualquier persona razonable, conocedora de la relación que existe entre nosotros: relación que si bien pertenece ya al pasado por el reciente proceder de usted, no queda anulada en su condición de antecedente determinante. No voy a emitir aquí juicios sobre el discernimiento de ninguna persona. Considero suficiente señalarle que existen ciertas conveniencias y cánones sociales que deberían impedir a un pariente mío, en cierta manera próximo, llamar la atención en estos alrededores colocándose a un nivel social no solo muy por debajo del mío, sino asociado en el mejor de los casos con las falsas erudiciones de aventureros literarios o políticos. En cualquier caso, la resolución en contrario lo excluiría a usted de ser recibido en mi casa en el futuro.

Sinceramente suyo,

EDWARD CASAUBON

Dorothea, mientras tanto, daba vueltas inocentemente en la cabeza a algo que contribuiría a irritar aún más a su marido, y que consistía en revisar, con una simpatía que fue convirtiéndose en agitación, lo que Will le había contado sobre sus padres y abuelos. Sus horas de soledad durante la jornada las pasaba de ordinario en el *boudoir* verde azulado, y Dorothea llegó a sentir gran cariño por su pálida exquisitez. Nada se había modificado exteriormente; pero mientras el verano avanzaba paso a paso sobre los campos que quedaban más allá de la avenida de los olmos, la habitación misma fue almacenando estos recuerdos de una vida interior que llenan el aire como una nube de buenos o malos ángeles, y que no son otra cosa que las formas invisibles pero activas de nuestros éxitos o fracasos espirituales. Dorothea se había acostumbrado tanto a luchar y a encontrar firmeza mirando por la avenida hacia el arco de luz que le venía del oeste, que su simple visión poseía ya una fuerza autónoma. Incluso el pálido ciervo parecía lanzar miradas de complicidad, diciendo sin palabras: «Sí, lo sabemos muy bien». Y el grupo de miniaturas delicadamente terminadas formaban un público como de seres que ya no están preocupados por sus destinos terrenales, pero sí interesados por las cosas humanas. En especial la misteriosa «tía Julia», sobre quien Dorothea nunca se había atrevido a hacer preguntas a su marido.

Y ahora, a raíz de la conversación con Will, muchas imágenes nuevas se habían congregado en torno a aquella tía Julia que era la abuela de Will; la presencia de la delicada miniatura, tan parecida a un rostro vivo que ella conocía, le ayudaba a dar mayor intensidad a sus sentimientos. ¡Qué injusticia apartar a una muchacha de la protección y de la herencia familiar tan solo por haber elegido a un hombre pobre! Dorothea, que desde pequeña importunaba a sus mayores con preguntas sobre todo lo que sucedía a su alrededor, había logrado establecer con cierta claridad las razones históricas y políticas de que los hijos primogénitos tuvieran derechos superiores, y de la necesidad de vincular las propiedades: aquellas razones, que le producían cierto temor reverencial, podían tener aún más peso de lo que ella creía, pero en este caso existía un problema de lazos de sangre que las dejaba totalmente al margen. Allí había una mujer cuyo hijo —de acuerdo incluso con el habitual remedo de instituciones aristocráticas, hecho por personas que no eran más nobles que un tendero retirado, y sin otras tierras que un prado y una dehesa que «mantener unidas»— contaba con un derecho anterior. ¿Era la herencia un problema de gusto o de responsabilidad? Todas las energías morales de Dorothea se inclinaban del lado de la responsabilidad: del reconocimiento de los derechos fundados en nuestros propios actos, como el matrimonio y la paternidad.

Era cierto, se dijo, que el señor Casaubon tenía una deuda con la familia Ladislaw; que debía devolverles lo que se les había quitado injustamente. Y al instante empezó a pensar en el testamento de su marido, hecho en el momento de su matrimonio, dejándole a ella la mayor parte de sus propiedades, con una salvedad para el caso de que tuviera hijos. Aquel testamento debía modificarse; y no había tiempo que perder. El problema recién planteado de la ocupación de Will Ladislaw proporcionaba la ocasión para enderezar las cosas. Dorothea estaba segura, teniendo en cuenta la conducta anterior del señor Casaubon, de que su marido adoptaría el punto de vista acertado si ella se lo proponía… ella, en cuyo interés se había propugnado una injusta concentración de propiedades. El sentido del bien y del mal del señor Casaubon le había permitido superar, y continuaría ayudándole a superar, cualquier cosa que pudiera recibir el nombre de antipatía. Dorothea sospechaba que a su marido no le parecía bien el proyecto de su tío, y esto hacía aún más oportuno que se alcanzara un nuevo entendimiento, a fin de que Will, en lugar de empezar desde cero,

obligado a aceptar el primer puesto que se le ofreciera, se encontrase en posesión de unos ingresos apropiados que su marido le destinaría mientras viviera, y que, gracias a una inmediata alteración del testamento, quedaran garantizados a su muerte. La certeza de que aquello era lo que debía hacerse fue para Dorothea como una repentina irrupción de la luz del sol, despertándola de su insensibilidad y de su ensimismada e indiferente ignorancia sobre las relaciones de su marido con otras personas. Will Ladislaw había rechazado la ayuda del señor Casaubon por unos motivos que a ella ya no le parecían válidos; y el señor Casaubon nunca había visto con plena claridad cuáles eran sus obligaciones. «Pero ¡lo verá! —se dijo Dorothea—. La gran fuerza de su carácter reside en eso. ¿Y qué estamos haciendo con nuestro dinero? No utilizamos ni la mitad de nuestros ingresos. Los míos personales solo sirven para que mi conciencia se sienta intranquila».

A Dorothea le agradaba de manera peculiar aquella división de unas propiedades destinadas a ella y que siempre había considerado excesivas. Estaba ciega, como ven ustedes, a muchas cosas evidentes para otros; era muy capaz de avanzar por donde no debía, como Celia trataba de hacerle ver; sin embargo, su ceguera a todo lo que no encajaba en sus virtuosos propósitos la llevaba a caminar sin riesgo por precipicios cuya visión podría haber sido peligrosa si el miedo la hubiese asaltado.

Las ideas que habían ido ganando consistencia en la soledad de su *boudoir* la ocuparon sin pausa durante el día en que el señor Casaubon envió su carta a Will. Todo se le antojaban estorbos para el momento de encontrar una oportunidad de abrir el corazón a su marido. El estado de ánimo del señor Casaubon exigía que cualquier tema se abordara poco a poco y, desde su enfermedad, Dorothea tenía muy presente el temor a causarle una agitación excesiva. Pero cuando el ardor juvenil se consagra a cavilar sobre la pronta realización de un acto, el acto mismo parece ponerse en marcha con vida independiente, superando obstáculos abstractos. El día transcurrió en un ambiente sombrío, cosa nada infrecuente, aunque el señor Casaubon se mostró quizá más silencioso de lo habitual; pero quedaban horas nocturnas que podían considerarse oportunidades para la conversación; porque Dorothea, cuando advertía que su marido estaba despierto, solía levantarse, encender una vela y leerle hasta que lograba dormirse. Y aquella noche se sintió insomne desde el primer momento, agitada por sus resoluciones. El señor Casaubon durmió como de costumbre algunas horas, pero ella se había levantado sin hacer ruido y llevaba ya casi una hora sentada en la oscuridad cuando él dijo:

—Dorothea, puesto que estás levantada, ¿te importaría encender una vela?

—¿Te sientes mal, querido? —fue la primera pregunta de su mujer, mientras le obedecía.

—No, en absoluto; pero te agradecería, ya que estás levantada, que me leyeras unas cuantas páginas de Lowth[92].

—¿Te importa que hablemos un poco en lugar de leer? —dijo Dorothea.

—Claro que no.

—He estado pensando en dinero todo el día… en que siempre he tenido mucho y especialmente en la perspectiva de tener aún más.

—Esas disposiciones son providenciales, mi querida Dorothea.

—Pero si una persona tiene demasiado dinero porque otros se ven injustamente privados de él, me parece que se debe obedecer a la voz divina que nos dice que hay que remediar esa injusticia.

—¿Cuál es el alcance de esa observación tuya, amor mío?

—Que has sido demasiado generoso en las disposiciones que me atañen… es decir, con las propiedades; y eso hace que me sienta desgraciada.

—¿Por qué? Yo solo tengo parientes comparativamente lejanos.

—Me he sentido impulsada a pensar en tu tía Julia y en cómo se la desheredó por casarse con un hombre pobre, un acto que nada tuvo de vergonzoso, puesto que su marido no era una persona indigna. Sé que fue esa la razón de que dieras una educación al señor Ladislaw y cuidaras de su madre.

Dorothea esperó durante unos momentos alguna respuesta que la ayudara a seguir adelante. No recibió ninguna y las palabras que pronunció a continuación le parecieron más convincentes, resonando con toda nitidez en la oscuridad silenciosa.

—Sin duda deberíamos considerar los derechos de tu primo mucho mayores, incluso extensivos a la mitad de esas propiedades que me has destinado. Creo que debería contar con unos ingresos proporcionados. No está bien que él padezca los inconvenientes de la pobreza mientras nosotros somos ricos. Y si existe alguna objeción al ofrecimiento que mencionó el otro día, colocarlo donde le toca y darle la parte que le corresponde haría desaparecer cualquier motivo para aceptarlo.

—Probablemente el señor Ladislaw ha estado hablando contigo al respecto —comentó el señor Casaubon, con cierta sarcástica vivacidad que no era habitual en él.

—¡Claro que no! —dijo Dorothea con gran energía—. ¿Cómo puedes imaginar una cosa así, cuando hace tan poco que ha renunciado a tu ayuda? Me temo que lo juzgas muy severamente. Solo me contó algunas cosas sobre sus padres y sus abuelos, y casi todo ello en respuesta a mis preguntas. Eres tan bueno y tan justo…; siempre has obrado con rectitud. Me parece evidente que en este caso hace falta hacer más; y tengo que hablar de ello, ya que soy la persona que se beneficiaría de ese «más» si no llegara a hacerse.

Se produjo una pausa perceptible antes de que el señor Casaubon respondiera, no tan deprisa como antes, pero con más cáustica intensidad aún.

—Dorothea, amor mío, no es esta la primera ocasión, aunque estaría bien que fuese la última, en que te has permitido hacer juicios sobre asuntos que van más allá de tu competencia. No voy a entrar ahora en la cuestión de hasta qué punto la conducta, especialmente en materia de enlaces, causa la pérdida de todo derecho familiar. Baste decir que en este caso no estás capacitada para emitir juicio. Lo que ahora deseo que entiendas es que no acepto correcciones, y mucho menos órdenes, en los asuntos que son total y exclusivamente de mi incumbencia. No es tarea tuya intervenir en mis relaciones con el señor Ladislaw y todavía menos alentar comentarios suyos que constituyan una crítica a mi manera de proceder.

La pobre Dorothea, amparada por la oscuridad, se vio agitada por un tumulto de emociones contrapuestas. La alarma ante los posibles efectos de una cólera tan enérgicamente manifestada habría impedido cualquier expresión de su propio resentimiento, incluso aunque hubiese estado libre de dudas y escrúpulos ante la idea de que quizá existiera algo de cierto en la última insinuación de su marido. Oyéndolo respirar aceleradamente después de haber hablado, Dorothea se quedó inmóvil escuchando, asustada, sintiéndose muy desgraciada, con una muda súplica interior de ayuda para soportar aquella pesadilla de una vida en la que todas las energías quedaban paralizadas por el terror. Pero ya no sucedió nada más, excepto que los dos siguieron mucho tiempo despiertos, sin que volvieran a pronunciar palabra.

Al día siguiente el señor Casaubon recibió la siguiente respuesta de Will Ladislaw:

Querido señor Casaubon:

He considerado con el mayor detenimiento su carta de ayer, pero me siento incapaz de adoptar su punto de vista sobre nuestras respectivas posiciones. Junto con el más pleno reconocimiento de su generosa conducta conmigo en el pasado, debo mantener, sin embargo, que una obligación de esa especie no puede en justicia privarme por completo de libertad. Estoy de acuerdo en que los deseos de un benefactor gozan de ciertos derechos; pero debe hacerse siempre una reserva sobre la naturaleza de esos deseos. Es posible que entren en conflicto con consideraciones más perentorias. Cabe también que el veto de un benefactor tenga tales consecuencias negativas sobre la vida de un hombre que el vacío consiguiente sea más cruel que generoso el anterior beneficio. Me limito a recurrir a algunos ejemplos llamativos. En el caso presente no comparto su opinión acerca de las consecuencias que aceptar un empleo —con el que desde luego no voy a enriquecerme, pero que nada tiene de deshonroso— pueda acarrear para la posición de usted, que me parece demasiado sólida para verse afectada de manera tan inconsistente. Y aunque no creo que pueda producirse ningún cambio en nuestras relaciones (desde luego, no ha sido ese el caso hasta ahora) que anule las obligaciones que el pasado me impone, perdóneme si no considero que esas obligaciones me impidan ejercer el derecho elemental de vivir donde quiera y de mantenerme con una ocupación lícita de mi propia elección. Lamentando que exista entre nosotros esta diferencia de criterio acerca de una relación de la que yo he sido el único beneficiario, quedo a su disposición, sabedor de mi persistente deuda,

WILL LADISLAW

El pobre señor Casaubon sintió (y ¿no debemos nosotros, siendo imparciales, acompañarle un poco en ese sentimiento?) que ningún hombre tenía más justos motivos que él para la repugnancia y la sospecha. El joven Ladislaw, estaba seguro, proyectaba enfrentarse con él y causarle trastornos; proyectaba ganarse la confianza de Dorothea y sembrar en su espíritu la falta de respeto y quizá la aversión. Se necesitaba algún motivo subterráneo para explicar el repentino cambio de Will al rechazar la ayuda del señor Casaubon y renunciar a sus viajes; y aquella decisión desafiante de instalarse en la zona, aceptando algo tan en desacuerdo con sus anteriores preferencias como los proyectos para Middlemarch del señor Brooke, revelaba con suficiente claridad que el motivo encubierto tenía que ver con Dorothea. El señor Casaubon no imaginó ni por un momento que existiera la menor doblez en su esposa: no sospechaba de ella, pero tenía la seguridad (lo que casi le resultaba igual de desagradable) de que su tendencia a formar opiniones sobre la

conducta de su marido iba acompañada de la disposición a ver con simpatía a Will Ladislaw y a dejarse influir por sus palabras. Su propia reserva, llena de orgullo, le había llevado a suponer erróneamente que Dorothea había pedido a su tío que invitara a Will a su casa.

Y ahora, al recibir la carta de su primo, el señor Casaubon tuvo que considerar sus deberes. Nunca se habría sentido tranquilo atribuyendo a sus actos otro motivo que el deber; pero en este caso, razones contrapuestas le obligaron a adoptar una postura de inhibición.

¿Debería dirigirse directamente al señor Brooke y solicitar de ese caballero tan molesto que retirara su propuesta? ¿O debería consultar a sir James Chettam y lograr su colaboración para protestar contra un paso que afectaba a toda la familia? En ambos casos el señor Casaubon era consciente de que el fracaso resultaba tan probable como el éxito. No podía mencionar el nombre de Dorothea en aquel asunto, y sin algún motivo claro de alarma era muy posible que el señor Brooke, después de recibir todas las protestas con aparente aquiescencia, concluyera diciendo: «¡No tenga miedo, Casaubon! Puede estar seguro de que el joven Ladislaw contribuirá a darle prestigio. Ya verá cómo esta vez he acertado con lo más conveniente». Y el señor Casaubon rehuía la posibilidad de abordar el asunto con sir James Chettam, con quien sus relaciones nunca habían sido cordiales, y que inmediatamente pensaría en Dorothea sin necesidad de mencionarla.

El pobre señor Casaubon desconfiaba de los sentimientos de todo el mundo hacia él, especialmente en su calidad de marido. Permitir que alguien supusiera que estaba celoso significaría admitir el punto de vista que, según sus sospechas, albergaban tales personas sobre lo desventajoso de su situación; significaría permitirles descubrir que el matrimonio no era para él un estado de dicha sin sombras; implicaría la aceptación de sus probables censuras anteriores. Sería tan desastroso como permitir que Carp, y en general todos los miembros de Brasenose, supieran lo retrasado que se hallaba en la organización del material para su *Llave de todas las mitologías*. Durante toda su vida el señor Casaubon había tratado de no reconocerse siquiera a sí mismo las heridas interiores de la inseguridad y de los celos. Y la costumbre de una orgullosa reserva llena de sospechas adquiría doble importancia en el más delicado de los temas personales.

De manera que el señor Casaubon, con altivez y amargura, guardó silencio. Había prohibido a Will que apareciera por Lowick Manor y ya daba vueltas en la cabeza a otras medidas para impedir sus designios.

Capítulo XXXVIII

C'est beaucoup que le jugement des hommes sur les actions humaines; tôt ou tard il devient efficace.[93]

GUIZOT

Sir James Chettam no podía ver con satisfacción los nuevos proyectos del señor Brooke; pero era más fácil poner objeciones que impedirlos. Sir James explicaba un día a los Cadwallader que hubiese acudido a almorzar con ellos sin su mujer diciendo:

—Delante de Celia no me es posible hablar como quisiera: podría herirla. No estaría bien, desde luego.

—Sé a qué se refiere… ¡El *Pionero* en Tipton Grange! —intervino al instante la señora Cadwallader, casi antes de que la última palabra saliera de la boca de su amigo—. Es una cosa que espanta… esa tendencia a comprar silbatos y a tocarlos donde todo el mundo los oye. Quedarse todo el día en la cama y jugar al dominó, como hacía el pobre lord Plessy, sería mucho más discreto y soportable.

—Veo que están empezando a atacar a nuestro amigo Brooke en la *Trompeta* —dijo el rector, echándose hacia atrás en el sofá y sonriendo sosegadamente, como lo habría hecho si el atacado fuese él—. Lanzan tremendos sarcasmos contra un terrateniente a menos de cien kilómetros de Middlemarch, que cobra rentas y no invierte nada.

—Me gustaría mucho que Brooke abandonara ese asunto —dijo sir James, con un pequeño fruncimiento de cejas que ponía de manifiesto su desagrado.

—Entonces, ¿es verdad que van a proponerlo como candidato? —dijo el señor Cadwallader—. Vi ayer a Farebrother… que se inclina hacia los *whigs* y enarbola a Brougham[94] y el Saber Útil; eso es lo peor que sé de él; y dice que Brooke está formando un grupo bastante fuerte. Bulstrode, el banquero, es su principal apoyo, pero Farebrother piensa que le irá mal cuando elijan al candidato.

—Muy cierto —dijo sir James con gran seriedad—. He estado informándome sobre este asunto, porque antes no había sabido nunca nada de la política de Middlemarch… ya que lo mío es el condado. Brooke confía en que descarten a Oliver por partidario de Peel. Pero Hawley me dice que en el caso de que manden a un *whig*, sería sin duda Bagster, uno de esos candidatos que salen de Dios sabe dónde, pero muy en contra de los ministros y hombres de gran experiencia parlamentaria. Hawley hablaba sin pelos en la lengua: se olvidó de que era yo su interlocutor. Dijo que si Brooke quería que lo despellejaran, había otras maneras más baratas de lograrlo que presentarse a las elecciones.

—Les avisé a todos ustedes —intervino la señora Cadwallader, moviendo mucho las manos—. A Humphrey le dije hace mucho tiempo que el señor Brooke iba a causar sensación… poniéndose perdido de barro. Y ya lo ha hecho.

—Bueno; se le podía haber ocurrido casarse —dijo el rector—. Eso habría sido mucho peor que un pequeño coqueteo con la política.

—Quizá lo haga después —dijo el señor Cadwallader—, cuando salga del barro con escalofríos.

—Lo que me preocupa es su dignidad —dijo sir James—, aunque todavía me preocupa más la familia. En cuanto a él, ya va teniendo muchos años y no me gusta imaginarlo corriendo riesgos. Sacarán a relucir cualquier cosa contra él.

—Supongo que no serviría de nada tratar de convencerlo —dijo el rector—. Es muy extraña la mezcla que hay en Brooke de obstinación e inconstancia. ¿Lo ha intentado usted?

—No, a decir verdad —respondió sir James—; no quiero dar la impresión de que trato de imponerme. Pero he estado hablando con ese joven Ladislaw a quien Brooke está convirtiendo en factótum suyo. Ladislaw parece una persona muy inteligente. Pensé que no estaría de más oír lo que tuviera que decir; y opina que Brooke no debe presentarse ahora. Creo que conseguirá hacerle cambiar de idea; quizá pueda impedirse el nombramiento.

—Ya sé —dijo la señora Cadwallader, asintiendo con la cabeza—. El futuro parlamentario independiente aún no se ha aprendido bien los discursos.

—Ladislaw, por otra parte… resulta un asunto molesto —dijo sir James—. Lo hemos invitado dos o tres veces a comer en casa (usted ya lo conoce, por cierto) como huésped de Brooke y pariente de Casaubon, pensando que su visita sería muy breve. Y ahora me entero de que en Middlemarch todo el mundo habla de él para director del *Pionero*. Corren historias suyas como redactor de panfletos o espía extranjero o cualquier otra cosa que se quiera imaginar.

—A Casaubon no le gustará eso —dijo el rector.

—Hay algo de sangre extranjera en Ladislaw —replicó sir James—. Espero que no defienda opiniones radicales y arrastre a Brooke consigo.

—Ese Ladislaw es un jovenzuelo peligroso —dijo la señora Cadwallader—, con sus canciones de ópera y su palabra fácil. Algo así como un héroe byroniano… Un conspirador enamoradizo, me parece a mí. Y Tomás de Aquino no le tiene mucho afecto. Me di cuenta el día que llevaron el cuadro.

—No quiero sacar a relucir el tema con Casaubon —dijo sir James—. Tiene más derecho que yo a intervenir. Pero es un asunto muy desagradable, se mire como se mire. ¡Vaya ocupación para una persona de buena familia! ¡Uno de esos tipos de los periódicos! No hay más que pensar en Keck, que es quien lleva la *Trompeta*. Lo vi el otro día con Hawley. Lo que escribe está bastante bien, creo yo, pero es una persona tan vulgar que deseé que hubiese estado del lado contrario.

—¿Qué cabe esperar de esos insignificantes periódicos de Middlemarch? —dijo el rector—. Supongo que no se puede conseguir un hombre de gran categoría en ningún sitio para defender intereses que en realidad no le preocupan y con una retribución económica que apenas le permite salir adelante.

—Muy cierto: ese es el inconveniente de que Brooke haya elegido a un hombre emparentado en cierto modo con la familia. Por mi parte, creo que Ladislaw ha hecho una estupidez aceptando.

—La culpa la tiene Tomás de Aquino —dijo la señora Cadwallader—. ¿Por qué no ha usado de su influencia para lograr que nombraran a Ladislaw *attaché* o para que lo enviaran a la India? Así es como las familias se libran de los jovenzuelos molestos.

—No hay manera de saber dónde acabará todo esto —dijo sir James con tono preocupado—. Pero si Casaubon no dice nada, ¿qué puedo hacer yo?

—Mi querido sir James —dijo el rector—, no hagamos una montaña de un grano de arena. Es bastante probable que todo quede en una simple humareda. Al cabo de un mes o dos Brooke y ese señor Ladislaw se cansarán el uno del otro; Ladislaw levantará el vuelo; Brooke venderá el *Pionero* y todo volverá a ser como antes.

—Existe la posibilidad de que a Brooke no le guste enterarse de cómo se le escapa el dinero de las manos —dijo la señora Cadwallader—. Si yo estuviera al corriente del detalle de los gastos que acarrea una elección podría asustarlo. No sirve de nada acosarlo con palabras abstractas como desembolso: yo no hablaría de flebotomía, sino que le vaciaría encima una olla de sanguijuelas. Lo que a los buenos tacaños no nos gusta nada es que nos quiten nuestros seis peniques.

—Y no le gustará que se saquen a relucir cosas contra él —dijo sir James—. La administración de sus propiedades, sin ir más lejos. Ya han empezado con eso. Me resulta muy penoso verlo y además ante mis propias narices. Creo que uno está obligado a hacer todo lo posible por las tierras que le pertenecen y por los arrendatarios, sobre todo en estos tiempos tan difíciles.

—Quizá la *Trompeta* le anime a realizar cambios y hasta puede que salga algún bien de todo ello —dijo el rector—. Sé que debería alegrarme. Oiría menos protestas cuando llegue el momento de pagarme el diezmo. No sé lo que haría si no hubiese un *modus*[95] en Tipton.

—Quiero que se ocupe de sus asuntos el hombre más competente… que contrate otra vez a Garth —dijo sir James—. Lo despidió hace doce años y todo ha ido mal desde entonces. También yo estoy pensando en Garth para administrar mis tierras. Me ha hecho un plan muy bueno para los edificios; y Lovegood difícilmente da la talla. Pero Garth no aceptaría Tipton de nuevo a no ser que Brooke le diera plena responsabilidad.

—Y tiene mucha razón —dijo el rector—. Garth es muy independiente: una persona original y sin complicaciones. Un día, cuando estaba haciendo una valoración para mí, me dijo sin ambages que los

clérigos raras veces entendían de negocios y que siempre hacían las cosas mal cuando intervenían en ellos, pero lo dijo de una manera tan respetuosa y con tanta calma como si me hubiese estado hablando de otra profesión cualquiera. Haría de Tipton una parroquia distinta si Brooke le permitiera administrarla. Ojalá que con la ayuda de la *Trompeta* pueda usted conseguirlo.

—Si Dorothea hubiese seguido junto a su tío, habría habido alguna posibilidad —dijo sir James—. Con el tiempo habría llegado a tener cierta ascendencia sobre él, y mi cuñada siempre ha estado descontenta con la administración de las propiedades. Tenía unas ideas muy buenas sobre esas cosas. Pero ahora Casaubon la tiene ocupada todo el día. Celia se queja mucho. Difícilmente conseguimos que cene con nosotros desde que estuvo tan enfermo. —Sir James terminó con un gesto de compasiva repugnancia, mientras la señora Cadwallader se encogía de hombros como para decir que no era probable que ella viese nada nuevo en aquella dirección.

—¡Pobre Casaubon! —dijo el rector—. Fue un ataque muy desagradable. Lo encontré bastante desmejorado el otro día en casa del arcediano.

—A decir verdad —continuó sir James, prefiriendo no detenerse en los «ataques»—, no es que Brooke vea con malos ojos a sus arrendatarios ni a cualquier otra persona, sino que tiende a reducir y a recortar gastos de esa manera.

—Vamos, ¡eso es una bendición! —dijo la señora Cadwallader—. Eso ayuda a que se reconozca por las mañanas. Quizá no sepa cuáles son sus opiniones, pero sí sabe dónde tiene el bolsillo.

—No creo que se ahorre siendo tacaño con la tierra —dijo sir James.

—Claro está que se puede abusar de la tacañería igual que de otras virtudes: sería una estupidez que yo matara de hambre a mis cerdos —dijo la señora Cadwallader, que se había levantado para mirar por la ventana—. Hablando del rey de Roma, por la puerta asoma.

—¿Cómo, Brooke? —dijo su marido.

—Sí. Ahora asústalo tú con la *Trompeta*, Humphrey; yo me encargo de echarle encima las sanguijuelas. ¿Qué va a hacer usted, sir James?

—La verdad es que no quiero ser yo quien aborde este asunto, dado nuestro parentesco; son cosas muy desagradables. Me gustaría que todas las personas se comportaran como caballeros —dijo el buen baronet, sintiendo que aquella afirmación era un programa sencillo y muy completo para el bienestar social.

—Así que están aquí todos ustedes, ¿eh? —dijo el señor Brooke, yendo de un lado para otro y estrechando manos—. Iba a ir a su casa en cuanto tuviera una oportunidad, Chettam. Es estupendo encontrar a todo el mundo, ¿no le parece? Bueno, ¿qué opinan de las noticias? ¿Verdad que todo va deprisa? Es muy cierto lo que dijo Lafitte[96]: «Ha transcurrido, desde ayer, un siglo»; al otro lado del canal de la Mancha están en el siglo que viene, ¿se dan cuenta? Van más deprisa que nosotros.

—Muy cierto —dijo el rector, cogiendo el periódico—. Aquí está la *Trompeta* acusándole a usted de quedarse atrás… ¿Lo ha visto?

—¿Eh? No —dijo el señor Brooke, dejando caer los guantes dentro del sombrero y ajustándose precipitadamente el monóculo. Pero el señor Cadwallader conservó el periódico en la mano, diciendo, mientras le bailaba la sonrisa en los ojos:

—¡Fíjese en esto! Hablan de un terrateniente, a menos de cien kilómetros de Middlemarch, que cobra las rentas en persona. Dicen que es el propietario más retrógrado de todo el condado. Creo que ha sido usted quien les ha enseñado esa palabra en el *Pionero*.

—¡Ah! Ese es Keck… un tipo sin cultura, ya sabe. ¡Conque retrógrado! Vamos, eso es estupendo. Cree que quiere decir destructivo, quieren hacer de mí una influencia destructiva, ¿comprende? —dijo el señor Brooke, con la alegría que proporciona habitualmente la ignorancia del adversario.

—Pues a mí me parece que sabe el significado de la palabra. Aquí hay una o dos pinceladas bastante hirientes. «Si tuviéramos que describir a un hombre que es retrógrado en el peor sentido de la palabra, diríamos que es una persona que se autodenomina reformador de nuestra constitución, mientras todos los intereses de los que es directamente responsable no hacen más que deteriorarse; un filántropo que se duele de que se ahorque a un bribón, pero a quien no importa que cinco colonos honrados estén medio muertos de hambre; un individuo que se rasga las vestiduras ante la corrupción y mantiene el arriendo de sus granjas a precios exorbitantes, que ruge hasta ponerse colorado criticando los burgos podridos y no le importa que todos los prados de sus fincas tengan portillos podridos; un hombre muy generoso con Leeds y Manchester, sin duda; mandaría al Parlamento a todo el que pudiera pagarse el puesto de su propio bolsillo; no está dispuesto en cambio a conceder un pequeño descuento en los arrendamientos para ayudar a un colono a comprar ganado, o a hacer un desembolso en reparaciones para evitar que el mal tiempo se meta por la puerta de un establo o para lograr que la casa de un arrendatario se parezca menos a la de un

jornalero irlandés. En cualquier caso, todos sabemos la definición de filántropo que da el bromista: un hombre cuya caridad aumenta en relación directa con el cuadrado de la distancia». Etcétera. Todo lo demás es para explicar qué tipo de legislador cabe esperar de un filántropo —terminó el rector, apartando el periódico y uniendo las manos detrás de la cabeza, mientras miraba al señor Brooke con aire de divertida neutralidad.

—Vamos, eso está bastante bien, ¿no le parece? —dijo el señor Brooke, recogiendo el periódico y tratando de soportar el ataque con tanta naturalidad como su vecino, pero sonrojándose y sonriendo nerviosamente—; eso de rugir hasta ponerme colorado criticando los burgos podridos… nunca he pronunciado un discurso en mi vida contra los burgos podridos. Y en cuanto a rugir y ponerme rojo y ese tipo de cosas… esos hombres nunca entenderán lo que es una buena sátira. La sátira, como ustedes saben, debe ser verdadera hasta cierto punto. Recuerdo que lo decían en la *Revista de Edimburgo* en algún sitio: tiene que ser verdadera hasta cierto punto.

—Bueno, por lo menos han dado en el clavo en el asunto de los portillos —dijo sir James, que quería mostrarse muy diplomático—. Dagley se quejó ante mí el otro día de que no tiene un solo portillo decente en su granja. Garth ha inventado un nuevo modelo… Me gustaría que lo probara usted. Cada terrateniente debería usar parte de su propia madera con ese fin.

—A usted le gusta la agricultura de lujo, Chettam —dijo el señor Brooke, dando la impresión de recorrer con la vista las columnas de la *Trompeta*—. Ese es su pasatiempo y no le importan los gastos.

—Yo creía que el pasatiempo más caro del mundo era presentarse al Parlamento —intervino la señora Cadwallader—. Se dijo que el último candidato derrotado de Middlemarch (¿no era Giles su nombre?) gastó diez mil libras y no consiguió el escaño porque tendría que haber sobornado aún a más gente. ¡Qué reflexión tan amarga para un hombre!

—Alguien decía hace poco —intervino el rector riendo— que East Retford no era nada comparado con Middlemarch en cuestiones de soborno.

—Nada de eso —dijo el señor Brooke—. Los *tories* sobornan, ya se sabe: Hawley y su pandilla sobornan con convites, ponche caliente con canela y cosas por el estilo; y llevan a los votantes borrachos a las urnas. Pero no van a conseguir salirse con la suya en el futuro… Será distinto en el futuro. Middlemarch está un poco atrasado, lo reconozco, sus habitantes están un poco atrasados. Nosotros los educaremos… haremos que progresen, pueden estar ustedes seguros. Los mejores nos apoyan ya.

—Hawley dice que tiene usted a su lado hombres que le harán daño —hizo notar sir James—. Dice que Bulstrode, el banquero, le perjudicará.

—Y que si a usted le tiran cosas —intervino la señora Cadwallader—, la mitad de los huevos podridos serán una manifestación de odio contra él. ¡Cielo santo! Piense en lo que debe de ser que a uno lo apedreen por opiniones que no comparte. Y creo recordar la historia de un hombre a quien fingieron ir a instalar en la presidencia pero al que, en cambio, dejaron caer a propósito en un montón de basura.

—Tirar cosas no es nada comparado con que saquen a relucir nuestras debilidades —dijo el rector—. Confieso que sería eso lo que más miedo me daría, si los clérigos tuviéramos que presentarnos a unas elecciones para hacer carrera. Tendría miedo de que calcularan todos los días que me he ido de pesca. Les doy mi palabra de que la verdad es el peor objeto arrojadizo que se puede utilizar contra nosotros.

—Lo cierto es —dijo sir James— que si un hombre entra en la vida pública debe estar preparado para sufrir las consecuencias. Tiene que resistir las calumnias.

—Mi querido Chettam, todo eso está muy bien, desde luego —dijo el señor Brooke—. Pero ¿cómo resistiría usted las calumnias? Debería leer historia… Mire en ostracismo, persecución, martirio y otras cosas por el estilo. Les suceden siempre a los mejores hombres, puede estar seguro. ¿Cómo es aquello de Horacio?… *Fiat justitia, ruat*[97]… algo parecido.

—Exactamente —dijo sir James, con un poco más de calor del habitual—. Lo que quiero decir con resistir las calumnias es que hay que estar en condiciones de demostrar que la acusación es falsa.

—Y no es martirio pagar los gastos en que ha incurrido uno mismo —dijo la señora Cadwallader.

Fue, sin embargo, el palpable acaloramiento de sir James lo que más perturbó a Brooke.

—Bien, ya sabe usted, Chettam —dijo, levantándose, recogiendo el sombrero y apoyándose en el bastón —, que nosotros dos tenemos sistemas diferentes. Usted está completamente a favor de invertir en sus granjas. Yo no voy a defender que mi sistema sea bueno en todos los casos… en todos los casos, ya me comprende usted.

—Debería hacerse una nueva valoración cada cierto tiempo —dijo sir James—. Las devoluciones están muy bien de cuando en cuando, pero yo soy partidario de una valoración justa. ¿Qué opina usted, Cadwallader?

—Estoy de acuerdo con usted. Si yo fuera Brooke, silenciaría de inmediato a la *Trompeta* encargando a Garth que realizara una nueva valoración de las granjas y dándole carta blanca en cuestión de portillos y de reparaciones: ese es mi punto de vista sobre la situación política —dijo el rector, poniendo los pulgares en las sisas del chaleco y riendo en dirección al señor Brooke.

—Eso sería hacer algo muy espectacular, ¿sabe usted? —dijo el tío de Celia—. A ver dónde encuentra ese periódico otro terrateniente que haya molestado menos que yo a sus arrendatarios por retrasos en los pagos. Permito a los viejos colonos que se queden. Soy muy condescendiente, déjenme decírselo, muy condescendiente. Tengo mis propias ideas y siempre las defiendo. Y a un hombre que hace eso se le acusa de excéntrico, de incoherente y de todas esas cosas. Cuando cambie de dirección, seguiré mis propias ideas.

Después de aquello, el señor Brooke recordó que se había olvidado de enviar un paquete desde Tipton Grange y se despidió precipitadamente de todos.

—No quería tomarme demasiadas libertades con Brooke —dijo sir James—; ya veo que se ha picado. En cuanto a lo que dice de los colonos antiguos, la verdad es que los nuevos no aceptarían las granjas en las condiciones actuales.

—Tengo la impresión de que acabará cambiando de idea —dijo el rector—. Pero tú tirabas de un lado, Elinor, y nosotros de otro. Tú querías asustarlo con los gastos y nosotros queríamos asustarlo para que gaste. Es mejor dejar que trate de hacerse popular y descubra que su reputación como terrateniente es un obstáculo en su camino. No creo que ni el *Pionero* ni Ladislaw ni los discursos de Brooke en Middlemarch tengan la menor importancia. Pero sí me parece serio que los habitantes de Tipton vivan un poco mejor.

—Perdonadme, pero sois vosotros dos quienes vais por un camino equivocado —dijo la señora Cadwallader—. Deberíais haberle demostrado que pierde dinero con una mala administración y después habríamos podido seguir todos juntos. Si lo subís a lomos de la política, más vale que os echéis a temblar. Era distinto cuando decía tonterías en su casa y las llamaba ideas.

Capítulo XXXIX

Si, al igual que yo, también tú
ves a la virtud ataviada de mujer,
y osas amarla, y decirlo,
y olvidas el él y el ella;

y si ese amor, pese a su nobleza,
lo ocultas a hombres ignorantes,
que no lo creerían,
o, si lo hicieran, lo ridiculizarían,

habrás hecho algo más valiente
de lo que hicieron todas las personas ilustres,
y brotará de ahí algo aún más meritorio,
que es mantenerlo oculto.

JOHN DONNE

La inteligencia de sir James Chettam no era demasiado fértil en estratagemas, pero su creciente impaciencia por «convencer a Brooke», al enfrentarse a su firme convicción de que Dorothea podía influir positivamente sobre su tío, tuvo consecuencias prácticas y produjo un modesto plan; se trataba de alegar una indisposición de Celia como razón para llevar a Dorothea a Freshitt Hall y dejarla de camino en Tipton Grange con el coche, después de explicarle con toda claridad la situación en que se hallaba la administración de las propiedades de su tío.

Tal fue la razón de que un día, cerca de las cuatro de la tarde, cuando el señor Brooke y Ladislaw se hallaban en la biblioteca, se abriera la puerta para anunciar a la señora Casaubon.

Hasta un momento antes Will había estado hundido en las simas más profundas del aburrimiento y, obligado a ayudar al señor Brooke en la ordenación de «documentos» sobre ejecuciones de ladrones de ovejas, ejemplificaba el poder de nuestras mentes para cabalgar sobre varios caballos al mismo tiempo considerando interiormente medidas para conseguir un alojamiento en Middlemarch y acabar así con su obligada residencia en Tipton Grange, mientras entre aquellas imágenes más sólidas revoloteaba una divertida visión de un poema épico sobre el robo de ovejas escrito con homérico lujo de detalles. Al anunciarse la visita de la señora Casaubon, Will se levantó como si hubiera recibido una descarga eléctrica y sintió un cosquilleo en las puntas de los dedos. Cualquier observador habría advertido un cambio en el color de su tez, en la posición de sus músculos faciales y en el brillo de la mirada, y eso le hubiera permitido imaginarse a todas las moléculas de su cuerpo transmitiéndole el mensaje de un toque mágico. Y así era, en efecto. Porque la magia eficaz es naturaleza trascendida; y ¿quién medirá la sutileza de esos toques que transmiten tanto las cualidades del alma como las del cuerpo y hacen que la pasión de un hombre por una mujer difiera de su pasión por otra, al igual que la alegría por la luz de la mañana sobre valle, río y blanca cumbre de montaña difiere de la alegría entre linternas chinas y entrepaños de cristal? También Will estaba hecho de una sustancia muy impresionable. El arco de un violín que se le aproximara inteligentemente podría de un solo golpe cambiar el aspecto del mundo para él, y sus puntos de vista se modificaban con tanta facilidad como sus estados de ánimo. La entrada de Dorothea le trajo el frescor de la mañana.

—Vaya, ¡qué sorpresa tan agradable! —dijo el señor Brooke, acercándose a ella y besándola—. Has dejado a Casaubon con sus libros, supongo. Eso está bien. No debemos permitir que te hagas demasiado sabia siendo mujer, ya me entiendes.

—No hay peligro de eso, tío —dijo Dorothea, volviéndose hacia Will y estrechándole la mano con sincera cordialidad, aunque sin añadir ninguna otra forma de saludo y sin dejar de hablar con su tío—. Soy muy lenta. Cuando quiero sumergirme en los libros, me encuentro muchas veces haciendo novillos con el pensamiento. Descubro que es más fácil diseñar casas para los colonos que ser persona instruida.

Se sentó junto a su tío frente a Will y algo la tenía tan preocupada que casi le hacía olvidarse de la presencia de este, que se sintió ridículamente desilusionado, como si hubiese imaginado que la visita de Dorothea tenía algo que ver con él.

—Es cierto; hacer proyectos era tu entretenimiento favorito. Pero es bueno cambiar un poco de ocupación. Los entretenimientos tienden a dominarnos en exceso; y no está bien que eso suceda. Debemos sujetar con firmeza las riendas. Nunca he permitido que me arrastraran; siempre he acabado frenando. Eso es lo que le digo a Ladislaw. Él y yo somos muy parecidos, ¿sabes?: le gusta probarlo todo. Estamos trabajando en la pena capital. Vamos a hacer muchas cosas juntos, Ladislaw y yo.

—Sí —dijo Dorothea, tan dispuesta como siempre a entrar en materia—. Sir James me ha estado diciendo que espera ver pronto grandes cambios en la administración de tus propiedades… que estás pensando en hacer una valoración de las granjas, reparaciones y mejoras en las casas, para que Tipton parezca un sitio completamente distinto. ¡Qué alegría! —continuó, uniendo las manos, en una vuelta a aquellos impetuosos modales algo infantiles, reprimidos a partir de su matrimonio—. Si todavía viviese aquí, ¡volvería a montar a caballo para recorrer contigo los alrededores y verlo todo! Y vas a contratar al señor Garth, que alabó mis planos, dice sir James.

—Chettam se precipita un poco —dijo el señor Brooke, ruborizándose levemente—. Se precipita un poco, ¿sabes? Nunca he dicho que fuera a hacer nada de eso. Tampoco he dicho que no fuera a hacerlo, ya me entiendes.

—Sir James confía en que lo hagas —dijo Dorothea, con una voz tan clara y libre de vacilaciones como la de un joven director de coro entonando el credo—, puesto que quieres ir al Parlamento como una persona que se preocupa por mejorar la situación de la gente, y una de las primeras cosas que se debe mejorar es el estado de la tierra y de quienes la trabajan. ¡Piensa en Kit Downes, tío, que vive con su mujer y siete hijos en una casa con cuarto de estar y un dormitorio apenas más grande que esta mesa!… Y en los pobres Dagley, con su granja destartalada, que ocupan solo la cocina de atrás y ¡dejan las otras habitaciones a las ratas! Esa es una de las razones por las que no me gustan tus cuadros, tío, aunque a ti te parezca una estupidez. Solía volver del pueblo con toda esa porquería y fealdad como si fueran un dolor dentro de mí, y los cuadros del salón con sus tontas sonrisas me parecían un intento malvado de hallar deleite en lo que es falso, sin que nos importe lo dura que sea la vida para los vecinos que quedan más allá de nuestras paredes. Creo que no tenemos derecho a presentarnos ante el mundo exigiendo grandes mejoras hasta que no hayamos tratado de corregir los males que están al alcance de nuestra mano.

Dorothea se había ido exaltando a medida que hablaba, olvidada de todo, a excepción del alivio de expresar libremente sus sentimientos: una experiencia habitual para ella en otro tiempo, pero casi desaparecida a raíz de su matrimonio, que suponía una lucha perpetua de la energía contra el miedo. En un primer momento la admiración de Will estuvo acompañada por una helada sensación de lejanía. Un hombre raras veces se avergüenza de sentir que no le es tan fácil amar a una mujer cuando descubre cierta grandeza en ella, puesto que la naturaleza ha reservado la grandeza para los hombres. Pero a veces la naturaleza ha cometido penosas omisiones al llevar a la práctica su intención; como en el caso del bueno del señor Brooke, quien, en aquel momento, a pesar de su conciencia masculina no consiguió hacer otra cosa que balbucear ante la elocuencia de su sobrina. De inmediato, no se le ocurrió ningún otro modo de expresarse que ponerse en pie, ajustarse el monóculo y manosear los papeles que tenía delante. Finalmente dijo:

—Hay algo en eso que dices; hay algo en lo que dices… pero no todo… ¿no es cierto, Ladislaw? A usted y a mí no nos gusta que se les encuentren defectos a nuestros cuadros y a nuestras estatuas. Las jóvenes son demasiado apasionadas, ya se sabe, y pecan de parciales. Las bellas artes, la poesía y otras cosas por el estilo elevan a una nación… *emolit mores*[98]… ahora ya entiendes un poco de latín. Pero… ¿qué sucede?

Esta última pregunta iba dirigida al criado, que entró para decir que el guardabosque había encontrado a uno de los chicos de Dagley con un lebrato recién muerto en la mano.

—Ya voy, ya voy. Dejaré que se marche sin reñirlo, ya verás —dijo el señor Brooke en un aparte a Dorothea, alejándose acto seguido con expresión alegre.

—Espero que comprenda usted lo justos que son estos cambios que yo… que sir James desea —dijo

Dorothea a Will tan pronto como su tío se hubo marchado.

—Sí que lo comprendo, ahora que la he oído hablar de ello. No olvidaré lo que usted ha dicho. Pero ¿puede pensar en algo distinto por un momento? Quizá no se me presente otra oportunidad para hablar con usted de lo que ha ocurrido —dijo Will, alzándose con un movimiento de impaciencia y poniendo las dos manos sobre el respaldo de la silla.

—Por favor, dígame de qué se trata —respondió ella con ansiedad, levantándose también y dirigiéndose hacia la ventana abierta, por donde Monk miraba hacia el interior del cuarto, jadeando y moviendo la cola. Dorothea inclinó el cuerpo sobre el marco de la ventana y puso la mano en la cabeza del perro; porque si bien, como ya sabemos, no le gustaban los animales domésticos que se llevan en brazos o pueden pisarse, siempre se interesaba mucho por los sentimientos de los perros y se mostraba muy cortés si tenía que rechazar sus muestras de afecto.

Will la siguió con los ojos y dijo:

—La imagino al corriente de que el señor Casaubon me ha prohibido ir a su casa.

—No; lo ignoraba —dijo Dorothea después de una breve pausa. Estaba a todas luces muy afectada—. Lo siento mucho, muchísimo —añadió tristemente. Pensaba en algo que Will ignoraba: la conversación con su marido en la oscuridad; y la abrumó de nuevo la seguridad de que no podría influir en las acciones del señor Casaubon. Lo pesaroso de su expresión convenció a Will de que no era él su única causa y de que a Dorothea no se le había ocurrido que fuera ella el motivo de la antipatía y de los celos del señor Casaubon. Al advertirlo sintió una extraña mezcla de alegría y desazón: de alegría porque habitaba y era apreciado en el pensamiento de Dorothea como en un hogar virginal, sin sospechas y sin limitaciones; de desazón, porque tenía muy poca importancia para ella, porque no le resultaba lo bastante formidable, porque lo trataba con una benevolencia sin vacilaciones que no le halagaba en absoluto. Pero como su temor a que Dorothea cambiase era más fuerte que su descontento, empezó a hablar de nuevo en un tono de simple explicación.

—Al señor Casaubon le desagrada que haya aceptado un puesto que considera poco apropiado, dada mi condición de primo suyo. Le he respondido que no puedo ceder en ese punto. Me resulta un poco difícil aceptar que mi camino en la vida haya de verse obstaculizado por prejuicios que considero ridículos. Si se llevan demasiado lejos, los deberes impuestos por el agradecimiento se convierten en un estigma de esclavitud que se nos grabó a fuego cuando éramos demasiado jóvenes para advertir su significado. No habría aceptado si no tuviera intención de convertirlo en una actividad útil y honorable. No estoy obligado a entender la dignidad familiar de ninguna otra forma.

Dorothea se sintió muy desgraciada. Creía que su marido estaba totalmente equivocado y por más motivos de los que Will había mencionado.

—Será mejor que no hablemos de ese tema —dijo ella, con un temblor en la voz que no le era habitual —, dado que el señor Casaubon y usted disienten. ¿Tiene propósito de quedarse? —Dorothea miraba hacia el césped, perdida en melancólica meditación.

—Sí; pero ahora será muy difícil que pueda verla —respondió Will, en un tono casi de queja adolescente.

—Es cierto —dijo Dorothea, volviéndose y fijando en él la mirada—; no me verá nunca prácticamente. Pero tendré noticias de usted. Sabré qué es lo que está haciendo para mi tío.

—Yo apenas sabré nada de usted —respondió Will—. Nadie me contará nada.

—Mi vida es muy simple —dijo Dorothea, curvando los labios en una exquisita sonrisa que irradiaba melancolía—. Siempre estoy en Lowick.

—Eso es un terrible encierro —dijo Will impetuosamente.

—No, no lo crea —respondió Dorothea—. No tengo otros anhelos. —Will no dijo nada, pero ella captó el cambio en su expresión—. Me refiero a mí misma. Excepto que me gustaría no poseer tanto como poseo sin hacer algo por los demás. Pero tengo una íntima creencia que me consuela.

—¿Cuál es? —dijo Will, más bien celoso de aquella creencia.

—Que al desear lo que es perfectamente bueno, incluso cuando no sabemos en realidad qué es, ni tampoco podemos hacer lo que queremos, somos parte del poder divino contra el mal… estamos ampliando el alcance de la luz y estrechando el cerco en torno a las tinieblas.

—Eso es una mística muy hermosa… Es…

—Por favor, no le dé ningún nombre —dijo Dorothea alzando las manos en gesto de súplica—. Dirá usted que es persa, o le pondrá cualquier otro apellido geográfico. Se trata de mi vida. Es algo que he encontrado y que no quiero perder. Siempre he ansiado hallar mi propia religión desde que era niña. Solía rezar mucho… Ahora no lo hago casi nunca. Trato de no desear solo para mí, porque eso podría no ser

bueno para otros y yo ya tengo demasiado. Se lo explico para que sepa cómo transcurren mis días en Lowick.

—¡Que Dios la bendiga por habérmelo dicho! —exclamó Will ardientemente y bastante sorprendido de sí mismo. Se miraban como dos niños muy amigos que se estuvieran haciendo confidencias sobre pájaros.

—¿Cuál es su religión? —preguntó Dorothea—. No me refiero a lo que sabe de religión, sino a la creencia que más le ayuda.

—Amar lo que es bueno y hermoso cuando lo veo —dijo Will—. Pero soy rebelde: no me siento obligado, como usted, a someterme a lo que no me gusta.

—Si le gusta lo que es bueno, viene a ser la misma cosa —dijo Dorothea, sonriendo.

—Eso es muy sutil —dijo Will.

—Sí; el señor Casaubon dice a menudo que soy demasiado sutil. A mí no me lo parece —dijo Dorothea, bromeando—. ¡Cuánto tarda mi tío! No tengo más remedio que ir a buscarlo. Celia me espera en Freshitt Hall.

Will se ofreció a despedirla del señor Brooke, pero el tío de Dorothea reapareció en aquel instante y dijo que la acompañaría en el coche hasta la granja de Dagley, para hablar del pequeño delincuente que había sido sorprendido con el lebrato. Dorothea volvió al asunto de las tierras mientras iban de camino, pero el señor Brooke, superada ya la sorpresa, encarriló la conversación hacia donde quiso.

—Veamos —replicó—: Chettam me critica, pero yo no protegería la caza si no fuera por Chettam, y él no puede decir que ese gasto sea en beneficio de los colonos, ¿comprendes? Es algo que va un poco contra mis sentimientos; la caza furtiva, por ejemplo, si te paras a considerarlo… He pensado a menudo en ocuparme de eso. No hace mucho, trajeron ante mí a Flavell, el predicador metodista, por haber abatido una liebre que se le cruzó en el camino cuando él y su mujer estaban dando un paseo. Fue muy rápido y le dio un golpe en el cuello.

—Me parece una brutalidad —dijo Dorothea.

—Bueno, a mí, tengo que confesarlo, me pareció bastante mal en un predicador metodista, ya me entiendes. Y Johnson dijo: «Ahora se dará usted cuenta de lo hipócrita que es». Y, a fe mía, pensé que Flavell tenía muy poco en común con el «tipo más excelso de hombre», como alguien llama al cristiano… Young, el poeta Young, si mal no recuerdo… ¿has leído a Young? Bueno, pues Flavell, con sus raídas polainas negras, alegó haber pensado que el Señor les enviaba a él y a su mujer la cena y que tenía derecho a matar a la liebre, aunque no fuera un gran cazador ante el Señor, como había sido Nimrod… Te aseguro que fue bastante cómico: Fielding hubiese hecho algo con eso… o Scott, tal vez… Scott podría haberle sacado partido. A la larga, cuando me puse a pensarlo, no pude evitar que me gustara la idea de que aquel buen hombre diera gracias a Dios por un guiso de liebre. Es todo una cuestión de prejuicios… prejuicios con la ley de su parte, ya entiendes… contra el bastón y las polainas y todo lo demás. Sin embargo, no sirve de nada razonar sobre las cosas; y la ley es la ley. Pero hice que Johnson se callara y conseguí que el asunto no trascendiera. Dudo que Chettam hubiese sido más benévolo y, sin embargo, ahora me trata como si yo fuera el hombre más duro del condado. Ya estamos en casa de Dagley.

El señor Brooke se apeó ante el portón del corral y Dorothea siguió su camino hacia Freshitt Hall. Es increíble cuánto más feas parecen las cosas si sospechamos que se nos censura por ellas. Incluso nuestra imagen en el espejo es susceptible de cambiar de aspecto después de haber oído algún comentario sincero sobre sus puntos menos admirables; y, por otra parte, es sorprendente con qué facilidad la conciencia acepta que se abuse de los que nunca se quejan o no tienen a nadie que se queje por ellos. El hogar de Dagley nunca le había parecido al señor Brooke tan deprimente como aquel día, cuando aún se sentía dolido por las acusaciones de la *Trompeta*, recogidas por sir James.

Es cierto que un observador, bajo la influencia suavizadora de las bellas artes, que convierten en pintoresca la penuria de otras gentes, podía sentirse encantado con aquella heredad llamada Freeman's End: la vieja casa tenía ventanas de gablete en el tejado de color rojo oscuro, dos de las chimeneas se hallaban cubiertas de hiedra, el amplio porche quedaba cegado por haces de leña y la mitad de las ventanas estaban cerradas con grises postigos carcomidos a cuyo alrededor crecían los jazmines en desordenada profusión; la mohosa tapia del jardín, con malvarrosas asomando por encima, constituía un perfecto estudio de colores suaves extraordinariamente mezclados y también había una cabra de avanzada edad (conservada sin duda por interesantes razones supersticiosas) tumbada junto a la puerta trasera de la cocina que estaba abierta. El musgoso techo de bálago del establo para las vacas, las rotas puertas grises del granero, los paupérrimos jornaleros de pantalones harapientos que descargaban un carro de maíz, dejándolo listo para desgranarlo al día siguiente; la mezquina vacada a la que trababan en aquel momento para ordeñarla, con lo que la mitad del cobertizo quedaba convertida en un vacío de color marrón; los mismos cerdos y patos blancos que

parecían deambular por el descuidado corral de suelo accidentado con aire deprimido por verse alimentados con unas sobras de calidad muy deficiente; todos aquellos objetos, bajo la tranquila luz de un cielo jaspeado por nubes muy altas, habrían compuesto un cuadro que podríamos calificar de «rincón encantador», capaz de despertar otras sensibilidades distintas de las que aviva el insatisfactorio estado de la agricultura y la triste falta de capital para mejorar los cultivos, tal como reflejaban sin descanso los periódicos de la época. Esas engorrosas asociaciones estaban en aquel momento muy presentes en la mente del señor Brooke y echaban a perder el pintoresquismo de la escena. El señor Dagley en persona era una figura prominente en el paisaje, con un bieldo en la mano y tocado con el sombrero que utilizaba para ordeñar: un viejísimo cubrecabezas de piel de castor, aplastado por delante. La chaqueta y los pantalones eran los mejores que tenía y no los habría llevado puestos un día de trabajo si no hubiera sido porque había ido al mercado y vuelto a casa más tarde de lo habitual, al concederse el lujo poco frecuente de almorzar en el Toro Azul. El porqué de que se hubiera dejado arrastrar a aquel exceso quizá fuera motivo de asombro para sí mismo al día siguiente; algo en el estado del país, una leve pausa en la recolección antes de segar las Hondonadas, las historias sobre el nuevo rey y los numerosos carteles en las paredes de las casas habían parecido justificar un pequeño margen de imprudencia. Una máxima conocida de todos en Middlemarch, y tenida por evidente, era que la buena carne debe ir acompañada de buena bebida, lo que para Dagley quería decir abundante cerveza seguida de ron con agua. Esas bebidas alcohólicas no habían falseado la realidad hasta el punto de lograr que el pobre Dagley pareciese alegre: solo lograron que su descontento fuese un poco menos mudo que de ordinario. Junto con la comida, Dagley había consumido un exceso de confusas conversaciones políticas, estímulo peligrosamente perturbador de su conservadurismo rural, que consistía en mantener que todo lo que existe es malo y cualquier cambio solo sirve para empeorar las cosas. Dagley tenía el rostro encendido y en los ojos una mirada decididamente batalladora —siempre con el bieldo en la mano—, mientras el terrateniente se acercaba con su desmañada forma de andar, una mano en el bolsillo del pantalón y la otra ocupada en hacer girar un fino bastón.

—Dagley, amigo mío —empezó el señor Brooke, consciente de que iba a mostrarse muy conciliador acerca de su hijo.

—¿De manera que soy amigo suyo, no es eso? Muchas gracias, señor, muchas gracias —dijo Dagley a voz en grito con una cortante ironía, que hizo removerse y alzar las orejas a Fag, el perro pastor; si bien, al ver entrar a Monk en el corral después de vagabundear un poco por el exterior, volvió a quedarse inmóvil en actitud expectante—. Me alegra oírle decir que soy su amigo.

El señor Brooke se dio cuenta de que era día de mercado y de que probablemente su digno arrendatario había comido en el pueblo, pero no vio motivo para dejar de decir lo que tenía que decir, ya que siempre podía repetírselo después a la señora Dagley.

—Han pillado a su chico Jacob matando un lebrato, Dagley: le he dicho a Johnson que lo encierre una hora o dos en el establo vacío, solo para asustarle, ya me entiende. Lo traerán a casa en seguida, antes de que anochezca; haga el favor de ocuparse de él, si es tan amable, repréndalo, ¿comprende?

—No, no lo haré: que me vaya al infierno si soy capaz de zurrar a mi chico por darle gusto a usted o a cualquier otro, aunque fuera usted veinte terratenientes en lugar de uno y malo por añadidura.

Las voces de Dagley lograron que su mujer apareciera en la puerta trasera de la cocina —la única entrada que se utilizaba durante todo el año y que estaba siempre abierta, excepto cuando hacía mal tiempo —, por lo que el señor Brooke, diciendo conciliadoramente: «Bien, bien, hablaré con su mujer… no me refería a pegar, desde luego», echó a andar hacia la casa. Dagley, sin embargo, todavía más inclinado a «cantarle las cuarenta» a un caballero que lo dejaba plantado, lo siguió al instante, mientras Fag, pegado a sus talones, evitaba, malhumorado, los discretos y probablemente caritativos avances de Monk.

—¿Qué tal está usted, señora Dagley? —dijo el señor Brooke, apresurándose un tanto—. He venido a hablarle de su chico; no quiero que le peguen, ¿comprende? —Esta vez se cuidó de hablar con toda claridad.

La fatigada ama de casa —una mujer flaca y consumida, de cuya vida había desaparecido el placer hasta el punto de que no disponía siquiera de un vestido nuevo que le procurara alguna satisfacción al arreglarse para ir a la iglesia— había tenido ya una disputa con su marido desde la vuelta de este a casa y estaba muy deprimida, temiendo lo peor. Dagley, de todos modos, respondió antes que ella.

—No; no le vamos a zurrar tanto si usted quiere como si no —insistió el arrendatario, utilizando la voz como un arma arrojadiza y deseoso de golpear con fuerza—. No tiene derecho a venir a esta casa hablando de pegar, cuando usted no da ni un trozo de madera para hacer arreglos. Vaya a Middlemarch y entérese de la reputación que tiene.

—Sería mucho mejor que te callaras la boca, Dagley —dijo su mujer—, y no tirases piedras contra tu

propio tejado. Cuando un hombre que es padre de familia se gasta el dinero en el mercado y vuelve a casa con una copa de más, ya ha hecho bastante daño por un día. Me gustaría saber qué es lo que ha hecho mi chico, señor.

—A quién le importa lo que haya hecho —dijo Dagley aún con más violencia—; soy yo el que tiene que hablar y no tú. Y voy a hablar, claro que sí. Le cantaré las cuarenta… con comida o sin ella. Y lo que digo es que he vivido en su tierra como vivieron mi padre y mi abuelo antes que yo, y nos hemos gastado el dinero en ella, y yo y mis hijos podríamos tumbarnos y pudrirnos encima para servir de abono porque no podemos conseguir dinero para comprarla, si el rey no fuera a cambiar las cosas.

—Mi buen amigo, está usted borracho, no sé si se da cuenta —dijo el señor Brooke de manera confidencial pero no muy juiciosamente—. Otro día, otro día —añadió, dando la vuelta para marcharse.

Dagley se puso inmediatamente delante de él, con Fag pegado a sus talones y gruñendo sordamente a medida que la voz de su amo crecía en volumen y se hacía más insultante, mientras Monk también se acercaba, en silenciosa y digna vigilancia. Los jornaleros que trabajaban en el carro estaban haciendo una pausa para escuchar, y parecía más prudente seguir inmóvil que intentar una ridícula huida perseguido por un individuo vociferante.

—No estoy más borracho que usted, más bien menos —dijo Dagley—. Aguanto la bebida como el que más y sé lo que quiero decir. Y lo que quiero decir es que el rey va a acabar con esto, porque lo han dicho los que lo saben; va a haber una reforma y a los terratenientes que nunca se han portado bien con los colonos se los tratará de manera que no tengan más remedio que marcharse. Y hay personas en Middlemarch que saben lo que es la reforma… y saben quién tendrá que marcharse. Me ha dicho uno: «Sé quién es tu terrateniente». Y yo le he dicho: «Espero que eso te sirva más que a mí». Y él ha dicho: «Es un tipo muy agarrado». «Sí, sí», he dicho yo. «A ese lo pillará la reforma», ha dicho él. Eso es lo que ha dicho. Y yo ya he descubierto lo que es la reforma… y es hacer que usted y los que son como usted tengan que salir por piernas; y no con olor a rosas precisamente. Y ahora haga lo que quiera, porque no le tengo miedo. Y será mejor que deje en paz a mi chico y se preocupe de lo suyo, antes de que se le venga encima la reforma. Eso es lo que tengo que decir —concluyó el señor Dagley, clavando el bieldo en el suelo con una firmeza que resultó excesiva cuando trató de alzarlo después.

Coincidiendo con este último gesto Monk empezó a ladrar con fuerza y el señor Brooke aprovechó el momento para escapar. Salió del corral lo más deprisa que pudo, bastante sorprendido ante la novedad de la situación. Nunca lo habían insultado en sus propias tierras y hasta entonces se sentía inclinado a considerarse un hombre que disfruta de generales simpatías (lo mismo nos puede pasar a todos si pensamos más en nuestra amabilidad que en lo que otras personas tal vez quieran de nosotros). Cuando el señor Brooke se peleó con Caleb Garth doce años antes, pensó que los arrendatarios se alegrarían de que el terrateniente se encargara personalmente de todo.

Algunos de los que hayan seguido el relato de su experiencia quizá se maravillen ante la densa oscuridad del señor Dagley; y es que en aquellos tiempos no tenía nada de extraordinario que un granjero de su condición fuese ignorante, aunque contase en la parroquia vecina con un rector que era un caballero hasta la médula, todavía más cerca con un vicario que predicaba sermones más eruditos que el rector, con un terrateniente que se había interesado por todo, especialmente por las bellas artes y las mejoras sociales, y con las luces de Middlemarch a menos de cinco kilómetros. En cuanto a la facilidad con que los mortales perseveran en la ignorancia, tómese a un conocido cualquiera que forme parte del mundo intelectual londinense y considérese lo que sería esa persona, invitado ideal en cualquier fiesta, si hubiera estudiado aritmética con el sacristán de Tipton y solo con inmensas dificultades lograse leer un capítulo de la Biblia, porque nombres como Isaías o Apolo le resultasen inmanejables después de deletrearlos dos veces. El pobre Dagley leía a veces unos cuantos versículos los domingos por la noche, y por lo menos el mundo no le resultaba después más oscuro que antes. Algunas cosas sí las conocía a fondo como, por ejemplo, las dificultades de la agricultura y lo imprevisible del tiempo, del ganado y de las cosechas en Freeman's End[99], llamado así de manera sarcástica, según decían, dando a entender que un hombre era libre de dejarlo si lo tenía a bien, pero sin que existiera un «más allá» terrenal accesible para él.

Capítulo XL

Era competente en su trabajo diario:
a los frutos de la diligencia,
no a la religión ni a la política,
consagraba todas sus facultades.
Estas personas tan perfectas en sus papeles secundarios,
cuyo trabajo es toda su recompensa…
¿cómo podrían hacerse sin ellas las leyes o las artes,
o alzarse las ciudades guarnecidas de torres?

Al observar efectos, aunque solo sean los de una batería eléctrica, resulta necesario a menudo que cambiemos de sitio y examinemos una particular mezcla o agrupación a cierta distancia del punto donde se inició el movimiento en el que estamos interesados. La agrupación a la que me voy a acercar se hallaba en torno a la mesa del desayuno de los Garth en la amplia sala donde se encontraban también los mapas y el escritorio: se trataba del padre, de la madre y de cinco de los hijos. Mary residía por entonces en casa esperando un nuevo empleo, mientras Christy, el muchacho sentado junto a ella, recibía enseñanza y comida baratas en Escocia, al haber manifestado —para desilusión de su padre— mayor interés por los libros que por la sagrada vocación de los «negocios».

Acababa de llegar el correo: nueve costosas misivas, por las que fue necesario pagar al cartero tres chelines y dos peniques y el señor Garth se estaba olvidando del té y de la tostada mientras las leía y las iba colocando abiertas formando un montón, unas veces moviendo la cabeza lentamente, otras torciendo la boca en debate interior, pero sin olvidarse de recortar un gran sello rojo de lacre aún intacto, del que Letty, como un terrier impaciente, se apoderó al instante.

La conversación proseguía con toda libertad, ya que lo único que podía perturbar el ensimismamiento de Caleb era que le movieran la mesa cuando escribía.

Dos de las nueve cartas habían sido para Mary, quien, después de leerlas, se las pasó a su madre y se quedó jugueteando con la cucharilla de té con aire ausente, hasta que, al acordarse repentinamente de algo, reanudó la labor de costura que había tenido sobre el regazo durante el desayuno.

—¡No cosas, Mary! —dijo Ben, tirándole del brazo—. Hazme un pavo real con esta miga de pan. —Había estado amasando una pequeña cantidad con ese fin.

—¡Nada de eso! —dijo Mary de buen humor mientras le pinchaba suavemente en la mano con la aguja —. Inténtalo tú: ya me has visto hacerlo suficientes veces. Tengo que terminar esta labor. Es para Rosamond Vincy, que se casa la semana que viene y no puede hacerlo sin este pañuelo —concluyó Mary alegremente, divertida con aquella última idea.

—¿Por qué no, Mary? —dijo Letty, muy interesada por aquel misterio y acercando tanto la cabeza a su hermana que Mary dirigió ahora la amenazadora aguja hacia la nariz de la pequeña.

—Porque forma parte de una docena, y sin él no habría más que once —dijo Mary, con aire de estar dando una explicación seria, con lo que Letty se echó para atrás convencida de haber resuelto el enigma.

—¿Has tomado ya una decisión, hija mía? —preguntó la señora Garth, dejando las cartas sobre la mesa.

—Iré al colegio de York —dijo Mary—. Me parece menos malo enseñar en un colegio que en una familia. Me gusta más dar clases. Y, como puedes ver, tengo que enseñar: no existe otra posibilidad.

—Enseñar me parece el trabajo más ameno del mundo —dijo la señora Garth, con tono reprobador—. Comprendería tus objeciones si no tuvieras los necesarios conocimientos o no te gustaran los niños.

—Imagino que nunca entendemos del todo por qué a otra persona no le gusta lo que a nosotros nos parece bien, madre —dijo Mary, con cierta frialdad—. No siento cariño por las aulas: prefiero el mundo exterior. Tengo ese defecto tan inconveniente.

—Debe de ser muy estúpido estar siempre en un colegio de niñas —dijo Alfred—. Semejante reunión de bobas, como las alumnas de la señora Ballard caminando de dos en dos.

—Y sin ningún juego que merezca la pena —dijo Jim—. No saben tirar piedras ni saltar. No me extraña que a Mary no le guste.

—¿Qué es lo que a Mary no le gusta? —dijo el señor Garth, mirando por encima de los lentes y haciendo una pausa antes de abrir la carta siguiente.

—Estar con un montón de niñas bobas —dijo Alfred.

—¿Es el puesto del que habías oído hablar, Mary? —dijo Caleb cariñosamente, mirando a su hija.

—Sí, padre: el colegio de York. He decidido aceptarlo. Sin duda es el mejor. Treinta y cinco libras al año más un suplemento por enseñar a aporrear el piano a las más pequeñas.

—¡Pobrecilla! Me gustaría que pudiera quedarse en casa con nosotros —dijo Caleb, mirando melancólicamente a su mujer.

—Mary no sería feliz si no cumpliera con su deber —dijo la señora Garth con tono dogmático, consciente de que ella había cumplido con el suyo.

—A mí no me haría nada feliz cumplir un deber tan repulsivo como ese —dijo Alfred, con lo que Mary y su padre rieron en silencio, pero la señora Garth respondió con gran seriedad:

—Haz el favor, Alfred, de buscar una palabra mejor que «repulsivo» para las cosas que te resultan desagradables. ¿Y si Mary te ayudara con el dinero que gane a ir a trabajar con el señor Hanmer?

—A mí eso me parece una vergüenza. Aunque la pobre aguanta ya lo que le echen —dijo Alfred, levantándose de la silla y alzando el rostro de Mary para besarla.

Mary se sonrojó y rio, pero no pudo ocultar que estaba casi a punto de llorar. Caleb, mirando aún por encima de los lentes, con las cejas en acento circunflejo, tenía una expresión en la que se mezclaban contento y pesar mientras volvía a ocuparse de la carta que tenía entre las manos; e incluso la señora Garth, con un gesto de tranquila satisfacción en el rostro, dejó pasar las indecorosas expresiones de su hijo sin hacerle ningún reproche, aunque Ben lo recogió de inmediato y se puso a cantar «¡Aguanta lo que le echen, lo que le echen, lo que le echen!» con un ritmo muy rápido, mientras golpeaba a Mary en el brazo con el puño.

Los ojos de la señora Garth estaban ahora vueltos hacia su marido, sumergido ya por completo en la carta que leía. Su rostro tenía una expresión de grave sorpresa, cosa que la alarmó un poco, pero a Caleb no le gustaba que se le hicieran preguntas mientras leía y siguió contemplándolo, inquieta, hasta que lo vio repentinamente agitado por una breve risa llena de alegría al tiempo que volvía al principio de la carta; luego, mirándola por encima de los lentes, dijo en voz baja:

—¿Qué me dices de esto, Susan?

Su mujer fue a colocarse tras él, poniéndole una mano en el hombro mientras leían juntos la carta, que era de sir James Chettam y ofrecía al señor Garth la administración de las propiedades familiares en Freshitt y en otros sitios, añadiendo que el señor Brooke, de Tipton, le había solicitado que averiguara si el señor Garth estaría al mismo tiempo dispuesto a ocuparse otra vez de sus propiedades. El baronet decía además con palabras muy amables que él personalmente deseaba de manera especial ver las propiedades de Freshitt y de Tipton bajo la misma administración y estaba convencido de que la doble gestión podría realizarse de manera plenamente satisfactoria para el señor Garth, a quien recibiría con mucho gusto en Freshitt Hall a las doce de la mañana del día siguiente.

—Es una carta muy cordial, ¿no te parece, Susan? —dijo Caleb, alzando los ojos hacia su mujer, que levantó la mano del hombro a la oreja de su marido, mientras apoyaba la barbilla sobre su cabeza—. Brooke no ha querido pedírmelo en persona, está bien claro —continuó, riendo en silencio.

—He aquí una muestra de aprecio a vuestro padre, hijos —explicó la señora Garth, mirando a los cinco pares de ojos que estaban clavados en ellos—. Los que lo despidieron hace mucho tiempo le piden que vuelva. Eso demuestra que lo hizo bien y que han notado su ausencia.

—Igual que Cincinato… ¡viva! —dijo Ben, cabalgando sobre su silla, satisfecho con la perspectiva de un menor rigor en la disciplina.

—¿Vendrán a buscarlo, madre? —dijo Letty, pensando en el alcalde y en la corporación vestidos de gala.

La señora Garth dio unas palmadas a Letty en la cabeza y sonrió, pero al ver que su marido recogía las cartas y que, con toda seguridad, quedaría muy pronto fuera de su alcance en el santuario llamado «negocios», hizo presión sobre su hombro y dijo con gran énfasis:

—No te olvides de pedir un sueldo justo, Caleb.

—Sí, claro —dijo el señor Garth, con voz de profundo asentimiento, como si fuese muy poco razonable suponer en él un comportamiento diferente—. Serán más de cuatrocientas libras entre las dos administraciones. —Luego, recordando algo repentinamente, añadió—: Mary, escribe renunciando a ese empleo. Quédate y ayuda a tu madre. Estoy más contento que unas pascuas, ahora que se me ha ocurrido esa solución.

No era aquella una metáfora muy adecuada para describir el estado de ánimo de Caleb, pero es verdad que entre sus talentos no figuraba hallar la frase acertada para cada situación, aunque fuese muy exigente a la hora de redactar cartas y mirase a su mujer como un tesoro de corrección en el lenguaje.

Al instante se produjo casi un alboroto entre los niños y Mary, con un gesto de súplica, ofreció a su madre la labor de bordado para que la pusiera a salvo mientras sus hermanos la obligaban a bailar con ellos. La señora Garth, con plácida energía, empezó a retirar platos y tazas, mientras Caleb, apartando la silla de la mesa, como si fuera a trasladarse al escritorio, continuó inmóvil con las cartas en la mano, contemplando el suelo meditativamente y extendiendo los dedos de la mano izquierda, de acuerdo con un mudo lenguaje suyo. Finalmente dijo:

—Es una verdadera pena que a Christy no le gustaran los negocios, Susan. A la larga necesitaré ayuda. Y Alfred tiene que ir a hacerse ingeniero… eso ya lo he decidido. —Volvió a sumirse en la meditación y en la retórica de los dedos durante unos momentos y luego continuó—: Haré que Brooke redacte nuevos contratos con los arrendatarios y prepararé un plan para la rotación de los cultivos. Y apuesto cualquier cosa a que podremos fabricar buenos ladrillos con la arcilla del rincón de Bott. Tengo que estudiarlo bien: sería más barato que hacer reparaciones. ¡Es un buen trabajo, Susan! Un hombre sin familia podría hacerlo muy a gusto sin cobrar nada.

—Ni se te pase por la imaginación —dijo su mujer, alzando el dedo.

—No, no; pero es una suerte que esto le suceda a un hombre cuando ha entendido cómo funciona su profesión y tiene la oportunidad de mejorar una zona del país, de ayudar a los agricultores con sus cultivos, de encontrar soluciones para los problemas y de construir edificios sólidos… para que se beneficien con ello los que ahora están vivos y los que vengan después. Prefiero ese puesto a tener mucho dinero. Estoy seguro de que no hay otro trabajo más honorable. —Al llegar a este punto Caleb dejó las cartas, metió los dedos entre los botones del chaleco y se irguió en el asiento, pero en seguida añadió con cierto temor reverente en la voz y moviendo lentamente la cabeza hacia un lado—: Es un gran don de Dios, Susan.

—Sí que lo es, Caleb —dijo su mujer, con el mismo fervor—. Y será una bendición para tus hijos haber tenido un padre que hizo ese trabajo: un padre cuya obra permanecerá aunque quizá se olvide su nombre. —La señora Garth ya no fue capaz en aquel momento de decirle nada más sobre la retribución que le correspondía.

A última hora de la tarde, cuando Caleb, bastante fatigado por el trabajo del día, estaba sentado en silencio con su libreta sobre las rodillas, mientras la señora Garth y Mary cosían y Letty, en un rincón, hablaba en susurros con su muñeca, el señor Farebrother apareció por el camino del huerto, compartiendo las brillantes luces y sombras de agosto con la hierba crecida y las ramas de los manzanos. Sabemos que apreciaba a los Garth, feligreses suyos, y que había hablado de Mary a Lydgate. El señor Farebrother usaba al máximo del privilegio clerical de ignorar la discriminación que se aplicaba en Middlemarch según el rango social y siempre le decía a su madre que la señora Garth era más señora que cualquiera de las matronas de la ciudad. Las veladas, sin embargo, las pasaba en casa de los Vincy, donde la dueña, aunque menos señorial, le ofrecía un salón bien iluminado y una partida de *whist*. En aquellos días las relaciones humanas no quedaban determinadas únicamente por el respeto. El vicario admiraba mucho a los Garth y una visita suya no era ninguna sorpresa para la familia. En esta ocasión, de todas formas, cuando todavía estaba estrechando manos procedió a explicar su presencia allí con estas palabras:

—Vengo como enviado, señora Garth: tengo algo que decirles a usted y a su marido de parte de Fred Vincy. El caso es, pobre chico —continuó mientras se sentaba y contemplaba con ojos brillantes a las tres personas que lo escuchaban—, que me ha hecho su confidente.

El corazón de Mary latió más deprisa: se preguntaba hasta dónde habrían llegado las confidencias de Fred.

—Hace meses que no vemos a ese chico —dijo Caleb—. No lograba entender qué es lo que le había pasado.

—Ha estado fuera, de visita —dijo el vicario—, porque la tensión en su casa era demasiado para él y Lydgate le dijo a su madre que no debía reanudar aún sus estudios. Ayer vino a verme y se desahogó conmigo. Me alegro mucho de que lo hiciera, porque lo he visto crecer desde que tenía catorce años y me

siento tan a mis anchas en casa de los Vincy que sus hijos son para mí como sobrinos. En este caso, sin embargo, resulta difícil dar consejos. Me ha pedido que les diga que se marcha y que se avergüenza tanto de su deuda con ustedes y de la imposibilidad en que se encuentra de pagarla, que no se siente capaz de venir personalmente, ni siquiera para despedirse.

—Dígale que no tiene la más mínima importancia —dijo Caleb, agitando la mano—. Estuvimos en un apuro, pero ya lo hemos superado. Y ahora voy a ser tan rico como Creso.

—Quiere decir —explicó la señora Garth, sonriendo al vicario— que vamos a tener suficiente dinero para educar bien a los chicos y permitirnos que Mary se quede en casa.

—¿Qué tesoro es ese que han hallado? —preguntó el señor Farebrother.

—Voy a ser el administrador de Freshitt y de Tipton; y quizá también de un buen trozo de tierra en Lowick: todo queda dentro de un mismo grupo de familias, y el trabajo se extiende como el agua una vez que se pone en marcha. Me hace muy feliz, señor Farebrother —aquí Caleb echó un poco hacia atrás la cabeza y extendió los brazos a los lados de la silla—, tener otra vez la oportunidad de encargarme del arriendo de las tierras y de poner en práctica algunas mejoras que se me han ocurrido. La cosa más molesta del mundo (se lo he dicho muchas veces a Susan) es ir a caballo y ver, al mirar por encima de los setos, que las cosas se han hecho como no se deben hacer y no poder ayudar a enderezarlas. No soy capaz de imaginarme en qué se ocupan los que se dedican a la política, pero a mí casi me vuelve loco ver una mala administración aunque solo se trate de unos cientos de acres.

Eran muy pocas las veces en que Caleb pronunciaba espontáneamente un parlamento tan largo, pero la felicidad tenía sobre él el efecto del aire de la montaña: le brillaban los ojos y las palabras brotaban sin esfuerzo.

—Le felicito de todo corazón, Garth —dijo el vicario—. No podría llevarle mejores noticias a Fred Vincy, porque no deja de pensar en el daño que les hizo obligándolos a desprenderse del dinero (robándoselo, es lo que dice) que necesitaban para otros fines. Me gustaría que Fred no fuese tan holgazán; tiene algunas buenas cualidades y su padre es un poco duro con él.

—¿Qué es lo que va a hacer? —preguntó la señora Garth con bastante frialdad.

—Va a intentar examinarse de nuevo para graduarse, y se marcha a la universidad porque quiere ponerse a estudiar antes de que empiece el curso. Se lo he aconsejado yo. No le insisto para que entre en la Iglesia… más bien lo contrario. Pero si va y trabaja lo suficiente para aprobar, demostrará que tiene energía y voluntad; y aparte de eso se siente completamente perdido; no sabe qué otra cosa podría hacer. De momento complacerá a su padre y le he prometido que, mientras tanto, intentaré reconciliar a Vincy con la idea de que su hijo siga otro camino. Fred dice con toda franqueza que no sirve para clérigo y yo haría cualquier cosa que estuviera en mi mano para impedir que un hombre dé el paso fatal de equivocarse al elegir profesión. Me repitió lo que usted había dicho, señorita Garth… ¿no lo recuerda? —El señor Farebrother solía decir «Mary» en lugar de «señorita Garth», pero parte de su delicadeza era tratarla con gran deferencia porque, según la frase de la señora Vincy, trabajaba para ganarse el pan.

Mary se sintió incómoda, pero decidió quitarle importancia a aquel asunto y respondió inmediatamente:

—Le he dicho demasiadas impertinencias a Fred… Hemos jugado juntos desde pequeños.

—Usted dijo, según él, que sería uno de esos clérigos ridículos que contribuyen a ridiculizar a todo el clero. Es una cosa tan mordaz que yo mismo me siento un poco herido.

Caleb se echó a reír.

—La lengua le viene de ti, Susan —exclamó con cierto regocijo.

—La impertinencia no, padre —dijo Mary en seguida, temiendo que su madre se molestara—. No me parece nada bien que Fred repita mis impertinencias ante el señor Farebrother.

—Fueron sin duda unas palabras un tanto atolondradas, querida —dijo la señora Garth, para quien hablar mal de una persona con autoridad era una grave fechoría—. Nosotros no valoraríamos menos a nuestro vicario porque hubiese un clérigo ridículo en la parroquia más próxima.

—Hay algo de verdad en lo que dice —intervino Caleb, poco dispuesto a que se quitara mérito a la agudeza verbal de Mary—. Un mal artesano de cualquier tipo hace que se desconfíe de sus compañeros. Las cosas van juntas unas con otras —añadió, mirando al suelo y moviendo los pies con desasosiego, sintiendo que las palabras no lograban reflejar sus ideas.

—No hay duda —dijo el vicario, divertido— de que al ser despreciables preparamos el espíritu de los hombres para captar la melodía del desprecio. Estoy de acuerdo con el punto de vista de la señorita Garth en esa materia, tanto si sirve para condenarme como si no. En cuanto a Fred Vincy, es justo excusarlo un poco: el engañoso comportamiento del viejo Featherstone contribuyó a echarlo a perder. No dejarle ni un céntimo al final fue una cosa completamente diabólica. Fred tiene el buen gusto de no insistir en ello. Y lo

que más le preocupa es haberla ofendido a usted, señora Garth; piensa que ya no tendrá usted nunca buena opinión de él.

—Fred me ha desilusionado —dijo la señora Garth con firmeza—. Aunque estaré dispuesta a pensar otra vez bien de él si me da motivos suficientes para hacerlo.

Al llegar a este punto Mary salió de la habitación, llevándose a Letty con ella.

—Debemos perdonar a los jóvenes cuando están arrepentidos —dijo Caleb, contemplando a Mary mientras cerraba la puerta—. Y tal como usted dice, aquel viejo tenía el diablo en el cuerpo. Ahora que Mary se ha marchado, tengo que decirle una cosa… Solo la sabemos Susan y yo, y usted no se lo contará a nadie. El viejo bribón quería, la noche misma en que murió, cuando Mary lo estaba cuidando, que quemara uno de los testamentos, y le ofreció dinero de la caja que tenía junto a él. Mary, como usted comprende, no podía hacer una cosa así: no podía tocar el cofre de hierro del anciano, ni nada parecido. Sin embargo, dese cuenta, el testamento que Featherstone quería quemar era el último, de manera que, si Mary le hubiese obedecido, Fred Vincy habría heredado diez mil libras. El viejo quiso favorecerlo en el último momento. Eso hace que Mary se sienta muy afectada; no pudo evitarlo: obró bien comportándose como lo hizo, pero tiene la impresión, dice ella, de haber derribado y roto contra su voluntad, cuando estaba defendiéndose con toda razón, algo que pertenecía a otra persona. Yo comparto sus sentimientos en cierta manera y si pudiera dar alguna satisfacción al pobre chico, en lugar de guardarle rencor por el daño que nos hizo, lo haría con mucho gusto. Ahora bien, ¿cuál es su opinión? Susan no está de acuerdo conmigo. Dice… cuéntale lo que dices, Susan.

—Mary no podía haber obrado de otro modo, aun sabiendo las consecuencias que tendría para Fred —dijo la señora Garth, abandonando por un momento su labor y mirando al señor Farebrother—. Y además lo ignoraba por completo. A mí me parece que una pérdida que sufre otro porque hayamos obrado bien no tiene por qué pesarnos sobre la conciencia.

El vicario no contestó inmediatamente y Caleb dijo:

—El sentimiento no atiende a razones. La chica siente de esa manera y yo comparto sus sentimientos. Uno no tiene intención de que su caballo pise a un perro cuando está retrocediendo para dejar paso libre; pero lo lamenta cuando sucede.

—Estoy seguro de que la señora Garth se mostrará de acuerdo con usted en eso —dijo el señor Farebrother, quien, por alguna razón, parecía más inclinado a cavilar que a hablar—. Difícilmente se podría decir que ese sentimiento por Fred que usted menciona esté mal… o, más bien, que sea erróneo… aunque nadie pueda basar ningún derecho en semejante sentimiento.

—Bien, bien —dijo Caleb——; es un secreto. No se lo contará usted a Fred.

—Claro que no. Pero le daré la buena noticia… Le diré que ya pueden ustedes hacer frente a las pérdidas que él les causó.

El señor Farebrother se fue poco después y al ver a Mary en el huerto con Letty se acercó a despedirse. Las dos formaban un bonito cuadro con la luz de poniente que abrillantaba las manzanas sobre las viejas ramas con muy pocas hojas: Mary, con su vestido de color lavanda y sus cintas negras, sostenía el cesto, mientras Letty, con su gastado delantal de mahón, iba recogiendo la fruta caída. Si alguien desea saber con más precisión qué aspecto tenía Mary, se puede apostar diez contra uno a que esa persona verá mañana, si está un poco atenta, una cara como la suya en cualquier calle con mucha gente: no la hallará entre esas hijas de Sión que son altaneras y caminan dando pasitos con el cuello muy estirado y ojos crueles: a esas debe dejarlas pasar y clavar los ojos en alguna persona no muy alta, más bien morena y rolliza, y de porte decidido aunque tranquilo, que mira a su alrededor pero no supone que nadie la mire a ella. Si tiene un rostro ancho y una frente cuadrada, bien enmarcada por las cejas, cabello oscuro y rizado, cierta expresión divertida en la mirada de la que la boca guarda el secreto y, por lo demás, rasgos completamente insignificantes… considere a esa persona ordinaria, pero no desagradable, como retrato de Mary Garth. Si se consigue que sonría, mostrará unos dientes pequeños y perfectos; si se la hace enfadar no levantará la voz, pero dirá probablemente una de las cosas más mordaces que su interlocutor haya oído nunca; si se tiene con ella una amabilidad, no lo olvidará. Mary admiraba más que a ninguno de los hombres que había tenido la oportunidad de conocer a aquel clérigo de rostro inteligente, facciones correctas y ropa desgastada pero bien cuidada. Nunca le había oído decir una cosa estúpida, aunque estaba informada de que cometía imprudencias; y quizá las palabras insensatas tenían para ella menos justificación que cualquiera de las acciones poco prudentes del señor Farebrother. Al menos, resultaba llamativo que las imperfecciones reales del vicario nunca pareciesen exigir el mismo menosprecio y desagrado que Mary manifestaba frente a las imperfecciones previsibles del clérigo que pudiera encarnar Fred Vincy. Tales irregularidades en el juicio se dan, imagino, incluso en inteligencias más maduras que la de Mary Garth; la imparcialidad la guardamos

para el mérito y el demérito en abstracto, cosas que ninguno de nosotros llega a ver jamás. ¿Adivinará alguien para cuál de estos hombres tan diferentes reservaba Mary su peculiar ternura femenina? ¿Para aquel con el que se inclinaba a mostrarse más severa o con el que era objeto de su benevolencia?

—¿Tiene usted algún mensaje para su antiguo compañero de juegos, señorita Garth? —dijo el vicario, mientras cogía del cesto una fragante manzana que ella le ofrecía y se la guardaba en el bolsillo—. ¿Algo que dulcifique aquel juicio suyo tan duro? Voy ahora mismo a verlo.

—No —dijo Mary, moviendo la cabeza y sonriendo—. Si dijera que no va a hacer el ridículo como clérigo, tendría que ser para afirmar que el resultado puede ser aún peor. Pero me alegra saber que se marcha para trabajar.

—Yo, por mi parte, me alegro mucho de oír que usted, en cambio, no se marcha. Mi madre, estoy seguro, se sentirá aún más feliz si va a verla a la vicaría: ya sabe que le gusta hablar con personas jóvenes y siempre tiene muchas cosas que contar sobre los viejos tiempos. Hará usted una buena obra, se lo aseguro.

—Iré a verla con mucho gusto —dijo Mary—. De repente parece que no tengo más que motivos para estar contenta. Creía que la añoranza del hogar iba a ser siempre parte de mi vida, y quedarme sin ese motivo de queja hace que me sienta bastante vacía: quizá me servía para tener algo en la cabeza a falta de sentido común.

—¿Podré ir contigo, Mary? —susurró Letty, una niña de lo más inoportuna, que siempre lo escuchaba todo, y que estuvo a punto de estallar de satisfacción cuando el señor Farebrother le pellizcó la barbilla y le dio un beso, incidente que ella contó después a su madre y a su padre.

Mientras el vicario se dirigía andando a Lowick, cualquiera que lo observara de cerca le habría visto encogerse dos veces de hombros. Creo que los escasos ingleses que utilizan este gesto no son nunca personas aburridas… pero ante el temor de que alguien presente un abrumador ejemplo de lo contrario diré tan solo que no lo son casi nunca; las personas que se encogen de hombros tienen de ordinario buen carácter y mucha tolerancia ante los pequeños errores de los hombres (incluidos los suyos). El vicario mantenía un diálogo consigo mismo en el que se decía que entre Fred y Mary Garth existía con toda probabilidad algo más que el simple afecto entre antiguos compañeros de juegos y se contestaba preguntando si semejante trozo de feminidad no era un bocado demasiado escogido para aquel caballerete con tantas imperfecciones. La respuesta a esto fue el primer encogimiento de hombros. Luego se rio de sí mismo porque probablemente había sentido celos, como si fuese un hombre en condiciones de casarse, cuando estaba tan claro como el agua que no era ese su caso. Momento en el que se produjo el segundo encogimiento de hombros.

¿Qué podían ver dos hombres, tan diferentes entre sí, en aquella «mancha marrón», como Mary se calificaba a sí misma? No era desde luego su fealdad lo que los atraía (y permítaseme prevenir a todas las jóvenes feas contra los peligrosos ánimos que les da la sociedad para que confíen en su falta de belleza). Un ser humano en esta nación nuestra tan cargada de años es un todo maravilloso, la lenta creación de largas influencias entrecruzadas; y el atractivo es uno de los resultados de la influencia recíproca de dos de esos todos: el que ama y el que es amado.

Cuando el matrimonio Garth se quedó solo, Caleb dijo:

—Susan, adivina qué estoy pensando.

—En la rotación de las cosechas —dijo la señora Garth, sonriéndole por encima de su labor de punto— o, si no, en las puertas traseras de las casas de Tipton.

—No —dijo Caleb con gran seriedad—; estoy pensando en que podría hacerle un gran favor a Fred Vincy. Christy se ha marchado, Alfred se irá pronto y pasarán cinco años antes de que Jim esté en condiciones de continuar con mi trabajo. Voy a necesitar ayuda y Fred podría venir y aprender cómo funcionan las cosas y trabajar a mis órdenes y eso quizá sirva para convertirlo en un hombre útil, si renuncia a hacerse clérigo. ¿Qué te parece?

—Creo que será difícil encontrar otra ocupación honrada a la que su familia pueda oponerse más —dijo la señora Garth con gran decisión.

—¿Qué me importan a mí sus objeciones? —dijo Caleb, con la firmeza que solía mostrar cuando había formado una opinión—. El chico ya es mayor y debe ganarse el pan. Tiene el suficiente sentido común y es rápido; le gusta la tierra y estoy convencido de que podría aprender pronto y bien si se pone a ello.

—Pero ¿crees que querrá? Su padre y su madre aspiraban a que fuera un caballero distinguido y creo que él opina igual. Toda la familia piensa que estamos por debajo de ellos. Y si la proposición viniera de ti, estoy segura de que la señora Vincy diría que queremos a Fred para Mary.

—La vida es una historia muy triste si tiene que regirse por tonterías de esa especie —dijo Caleb con repugnancia.

—Sí, pero cierta dosis de orgullo nunca está de más.

—Yo creo que está de más que ideas estúpidas nos impidan llevar a cabo una buena acción. No hay ningún tipo de trabajo —dijo Caleb con vehemencia, sacando una mano y moviéndola arriba y abajo para dar más fuerza a sus palabras— que se pueda hacer bien si a uno le preocupa lo que digan los tontos. Se tiene que estar interiormente convencido de que el plan es bueno y luego seguirlo.

—Nunca me opondré a ningún plan que decidas llevar a la práctica, Caleb —dijo la señora Garth, que era una mujer firme, pero conocedora de que había algunas cuestiones en las que su apacible marido se mostraba todavía más enérgico—. Sin embargo, parece cosa hecha que Fred vuelva a la universidad; ¿no será mejor esperar y ver qué es lo que decide después? No es fácil conseguir que una persona siga haciendo mucho tiempo algo que no le gusta. Y tú no estás aún completamente seguro del puesto que vas a tener o de lo que vas a necesitar.

—Bueno; quizá sea mejor esperar un poco. En cuanto a tener trabajo suficiente para dos, de eso estoy bien seguro. Siempre he estado muy ocupado con cosas diversas y siempre hay algo nuevo que surge en cualquier momento. Sin ir más lejos, ayer mismo… ahora que lo pienso, creo que no te lo he contado… fue bastante curioso que dos personas acudieran a mí por diferentes lados para hacer la misma valoración. ¿Y quiénes te imaginas que eran? —dijo Caleb, tomando un pellizco de rapé y levantándolo entre los dedos, como si formara parte de su relato. Le gustaba tomar rapé cuando se acordaba, pero de ordinario se olvidaba de que aquel pequeño capricho estaba a su alcance.

Su mujer dejó de hacer punto y lo miró con atención.

—Ese tal Rigg, o Rigg Featherstone, era uno de ellos. Pero Bulstrode llegó antes, de manera que voy a hacerlo para Bulstrode. Lo que todavía no sé es si se trata de una hipoteca o de una venta.

—¿Es posible que ese hombre vaya a vender las tierras que acaba de heredar… las tierras por las que ha tenido que cambiarse de nombre? —preguntó la señora Garth.

—El diantre lo sabrá —dijo Caleb, que nunca atribuía el conocimiento de hechos vergonzosos a ningún poder infernal por encima del diantre—. Hace mucho tiempo que Bulstrode quiere ponerle la mano encima a un buen pedazo de tierra… eso sí que lo sé. Y no es nada fácil conseguirlo en esta zona del país. —Caleb aventó cuidadosamente el rapé en lugar de utilizarlo y luego añadió—: Hay que ver las vueltas y revueltas que dan las cosas. Ahí tienes la tierra que desde el principio se esperaba que fuese de Fred y de la que según parece el viejo nunca tuvo intención de dejarle ni un centímetro, porque la destinaba a ese tropiezo de hijo que mantenía en la sombra, y que pensó en meter allí para fastidiar a todo el mundo, igual que él los hubiera seguido fastidiando de haber vivido más años. Pues lo que yo digo es que sería curioso que fuese a parar a manos de Bulstrode después de todo. El viejo Featherstone lo odiaba y nunca quiso trabajar con él.

—¿Qué razones podía tener una criatura tan miserable para odiar a un hombre al que apenas trataba? —preguntó la señora Garth.

—¡Bah! ¿De qué sirve preguntarse las razones de personas así? El alma del hombre —dijo Caleb, con el tono grave y el solemne movimiento de cabeza que acompañaba siempre a aquella frase—, el alma del hombre, cuando está muy podrida, produce todo tipo de setas venenosas y no hay ojo capaz de averiguar de dónde ha llegado la simiente.

Una de las peculiaridades de Caleb era que, dada su dificultad para encontrar palabras que expresaran sus ideas, capturaba, por así decirlo, fragmentos de formas de hablar que asociaba con diferentes puntos de vista o estados de ánimo; y cuando él mismo experimentaba un sentimiento de temor reverente, le obsesionaba la necesidad de usar fraseología bíblica, aunque era incapaz de encontrar la cita correcta.

Capítulo XLI

Fanfarroneando nunca pude prosperar,
porque llover, llovió todos los días.

Noche de Reyes

La operación comercial entre el señor Bulstrode y el señor Joshua Rigg Featherstone, en relación con Stone Court y las tierras anexas, a la que había hecho referencia Caleb Garth, dio origen al intercambio de una o dos cartas entre aquellos dos personajes.

¿Quién estará en condiciones de precisar cuáles puedan ser los efectos de la escritura? Si ha sido esculpida en piedra, aunque yazga boca abajo durante siglos en una playa olvidada o «descanse calladamente bajo los tambores y las pisadas de muchas conquistas»[100], quizá termine por revelarnos el secreto de las usurpaciones y otros escándalos sobre los que se murmuró hace muchos imperios, ya que este mundo no es al parecer más que una gran galería llena de ecos. Algo parecido sucede con frecuencia en el insignificante espacio de tiempo que cubren nuestras vidas. De la misma manera que una piedra a la que han dado patadas generaciones de payasos puede llegar, por una curiosa concatenación de causas, a manos de un erudito para que, con perseverancia, gracias a ella, establezca fechas de invasiones y descubra religiones, un poco de papel y tinta que han sido durante mucho tiempo envoltura inocente o simple relleno pueden mostrarse al fin ante el par de ojos que saben lo suficiente para hacer de aquello el comienzo de una catástrofe. A Uriel[101], que contempla desde el sol el progreso de la historia de nuestro planeta, el primer efecto le parecerá tan resultado de una coincidencia como el segundo.

Después de haber hecho esta comparación, que tiene bastante de grandiosa, me siento menos incómoda al llamar la atención sobre la existencia de personas vulgares por cuya intervención, por muy poco que nos guste, queda determinada en buena parte la marcha del mundo. Estaría bien, desde luego, que pudiéramos ayudar a reducir su número y quizá se lograra algo si no diéramos despreocupadamente ocasión a su existencia. Desde un punto de vista social, a Joshua Rigg se le podría considerar, en términos generales, una entidad por completo superflua. Aunque quienes, como Peter Featherstone, nunca han solicitado una reproducción de sí mismos, son los que menos escucharían semejante petición, tanto en prosa como en verso. En este caso, la reproducción tenía un mayor parecido exterior con la madre, en cuyo sexo la cara de rana, acompañada de unas mejillas sonrosadas y de una figura bien redondeada, es compatible con una buena dosis de atractivo para cierta categoría de admiradores. A veces el resultado es un varón con cara de rana, muy poco apetecible, sin duda, para cualquier categoría de seres inteligentes. Sobre todo si, de repente, se lo saca a relucir para frustrar las esperanzas de otras personas, mostrando así el aspecto menos favorable con que una entidad socialmente superflua puede presentarse ante los demás.

Sin embargo, las características vulgares del señor Rigg Featherstone eran compatibles con la sobriedad y la abstinencia de cualquier bebida alcohólica. Durante las veinticuatro horas del día se mostraba siempre tan acicalado, limpio y frío como el batracio al que se asemejaba, y el viejo Peter se había reído entre dientes pensando en un vástago casi más calculador que él y desde luego más imperturbable. Añadiré que el señor Rigg Featherstone cuidaba sus uñas escrupulosamente y tenía intención de casarse con una señorita bien educada (aún sin especificar), de buenas prendas personales y perteneciente con pleno derecho a una familia de la sólida clase media. De manera que sus uñas y su modestia eran comparables a las de la mayor parte de los caballeros, aunque su ambición hubiera tomado forma respondiendo únicamente a las

oportunidades de un dependiente y contable en una de las más pequeñas casas comerciales de un puerto de mar. Joshua Rigg consideraba a los Featherstone rústicos muy simples y absurdos, y ellos por su parte pensaban que su «educación» en un puerto de mar era el remate de la monstruosidad que suponía que su hermano Peter, y todavía más las propiedades de Peter, tuvieran escondida semejante sorpresa.

El jardín y el camino de grava, tal como se veían desde las dos ventanas del salón principal de Stone Court, nunca habían estado mejor cuidados que ahora, cuando el señor Rigg Featherstone, con las manos a la espalda, los contemplaba como su dueño y señor. Cabe preguntarse si los miraba por el placer de la contemplación o más bien para volver la espalda a la persona que se hallaba de pie en medio de la habitación con las piernas considerablemente abiertas y las manos en los bolsillos del pantalón; una persona que contrastaba en todos los aspectos con el acicalado y frío Rigg. Se trataba de un hombre bien encaminado hacia los sesenta, velludo y de tez muy encarnada, con muchas canas en las pobladas patillas y en los espesos cabellos rizados, un cuerpo más bien robusto que servía para poner de relieve las deficiencias de la gastada ropa que llevaba, aires de fanfarrón dispuesto incluso a llamar la atención durante unos fuegos artificiales y para quien sus comentarios sobre la actuación de cualquier otra persona tenían grandes probabilidades de ser más interesantes que la misma actuación.

Su nombre era John Raffles, y a veces escribía jocosamente B.U.F.O.N. después de su firma, comentando cuando lo hacía que había sido alumno en cierta ocasión de Leonard Lamb, de Finsbury, que escribía B.A. después de su nombre, y que él había dado origen a la ocurrencia de llamar a aquel celebrado pedagogo Ba-Lamb[102]. Tales eran las apariencias y las inclinaciones mentales del señor Raffles, y ambas parecían tener el rancio olor de las habitaciones para viajantes de los hoteles comerciales de aquel período.

—Vamos, Josh —estaba diciendo con voz sonora—, míralo así: se trata de que tu pobre madre empieza a cargarse de años y tú podrías mostrarte generoso para que viva cómodamente.

—No, mientras siga usted con ella. Nunca tendrá una vida cómoda con usted a su lado —replicó Rigg, con su voz aguda y fría—. Todo lo que yo le doy se lo quita usted.

—Ya sé que me guardas rencor, Josh. Pero de hombre a hombre y con toda sinceridad, un poco de dinero me permitiría convertir la tienda en un establecimiento de primera clase. El comercio del tabaco está creciendo. Sería una estupidez por mi parte no hacerlo lo mejor posible. Por la cuenta que me tiene, me pegaría a la tienda como una pulga a un vellón. Estaría siempre en la brecha. Y nada haría más feliz a tu madre. Ya ha pasado mi época de hacer calaveradas… He cumplido los cincuenta y cinco. Quiero instalarme en mi rincón junto a la chimenea. Y si por una vez me dedicara con empeño al comercio del tabaco, aportaría una inteligencia y una experiencia que no se encontrarían de buenas a primeras en ningún otro sitio. Quisiera no tener que molestarte una y otra vez y llevar las cosas definitivamente en la buena dirección. Considera eso, Josh, de hombre a hombre, y la posibilidad de hacer que tu pobre madre viva cómodamente el resto de su vida. ¡Siempre la he querido mucho, te lo juro!

—¿Ha terminado? —preguntó el señor Rigg con gran calma, sin dejar de mirar por la ventana.

—Sí, he terminado —dijo Raffles, recogiendo el sombrero que tenía delante, encima de la mesa, y dándole una especie de empujón retórico.

—En ese caso haga el favor de escucharme. Cuanto más repita usted una cosa, menos le creeré. Cuanto más quiera que haga algo, más razones me dará para no hacerlo nunca. ¿Supone que tengo intención de olvidar las patadas que me daba cuando era chaval y que se comiera las mejores cosas que había en casa, dejándonos a mi madre y a mí sin nada? ¿Cree que me olvido de que siempre venía para vender algo y guardarse el dinero y luego desaparecía y nos dejaba en la estacada? Me encantaría verlo recibiendo latigazos atado a una carreta. Mi madre fue una estúpida: no tenía derecho a darme un padrastro y ha sido castigada por ello. Se le pagará su asignación semanal y nada más; y dejará de recibirla si usted se atreve a venir de nuevo a esta casa o vuelve a esta zona siguiéndome. La próxima vez que cruce usted el portón, serán los perros y el látigo del carretero quienes le hagan salir.

Mientras pronunciaba las últimas palabras, Rigg se volvió y miró a Raffles con sus ojos saltones y helados. El contraste era tan llamativo como podía haberlo sido dieciocho años antes, cuando Rigg era un muchacho sin el menor atractivo y siempre a mano para recibir patadas y Raffles el adonis más bien corpulento de los bares y de las trastiendas. Ahora era Rigg quien ocupaba la posición ventajosa y cualquier hipotético oyente de esta conversación habría esperado tal vez que Raffles se retirara con aire de haber sido derrotado en toda la línea. En absoluto. Hizo una mueca, habitual en él siempre que perdía en algún juego; luego se echó a reír y sacó un frasco de aguardiente del bolsillo.

—Vamos, Josh —dijo con tono lisonjero—, dame un trago de aguardiente y un soberano para pagar el viaje de vuelta y me iré. ¡Te lo prometo! ¡Saldré tan deprisa como una bala, voto al chápiro!

—Recuérdelo —dijo Rigg, sacando un manojo de llaves—, si lo vuelvo a ver no le hablaré. Será como si

hubiera visto a un cuervo; y si usted insiste, no sacará nada en limpio excepto que se le conozca por lo que es: un bribón rencoroso, desvergonzado y pendenciero.

—Es una pena, de verdad, Josh —dijo Raffles, fingiendo rascarse la cabeza y alzar las cejas como si no diese crédito a sus oídos—. Te aprecio mucho, de verdad, te lo juro. No hay nada que me guste tanto como importunarte… ¡Te pareces tanto a tu madre que me cuesta renunciar a ello! Pero con el aguardiente y un soberano ¡trato hecho!

Extendió el brazo con el frasco y Rigg se dirigió hacia un buró antiguo de roble muy elegante con las llaves en la mano. Raffles había recordado al moverlo que el frasco quedaba peligrosamente suelto dentro de su funda de cuero y, al ver un papel doblado que había caído detrás de la pantalla de la chimenea, lo recogió y lo introdujo entre el cuero y el cristal para asegurar la estabilidad del recipiente.

Para entonces Rigg regresaba ya con una botella de aguardiente, con la que procedió a llenar el frasco, al tiempo que entregaba un soberano a Raffles, sin mirarlo ni hablar con él. Después de cerrar de nuevo el buró con llave, se acercó otra vez a la ventana y miró hacia el exterior tan impasiblemente como lo había hecho al principio de la entrevista. Raffles, mientras tanto, bebió un sorbo, tapó el frasco y lo depositó en un bolsillo lateral con irritante lentitud, haciendo una mueca hacia la espalda de su hijastro.

—¡Adiós, Josh… quizá para siempre! —dijo Raffles, volviendo la cabeza al abrir la puerta.

Rigg lo vio salir de la propiedad y echar a andar por el camino. Del cielo gris había terminado por caer una llovizna ligera que refrescaba los setos y los bordes cubiertos de hierba de los caminos apartados y que hacía apresurarse a los jornaleros que estaban cargando los últimos montones de maíz. Raffles, andando con el paso torpe de un vagabundo de ciudad que se ve obligado a hacer a pie un pequeño recorrido por el campo, resultaba tan incongruente entre la húmeda quietud y la laboriosidad rural como un mandril escapado de un jardín zoológico. Excepto las terneras, destetadas desde hacía ya mucho tiempo, no había nadie para contemplarlo, ni para mostrar desagrado ante su aspecto, a excepción de las pequeñas ratas de agua, que se alejaban al oírlo aproximarse.

Tuvo la suerte de que al llegar al camino real le alcanzara la diligencia, que lo llevó hasta Brassing; y desde allí tomó el ferrocarril recién construido, donde comentó a los otros pasajeros que los trenes habían probado su eficacia acabando con Huskisson[103]. El señor Raffles mantenía casi siempre la ficción de haberse educado en un buen colegio y de ser capaz, si se lo proponía, de quedar bien en cualquier sitio; de hecho se consideraba en condiciones de ridiculizar y atormentar a cualquier mortal, convencido del buen rato que se proporcionaba a sí mismo y a todos los que le escuchaban.

Ahora se dedicó a representar aquel papel con tanto entusiasmo como si su viaje hubiese sido todo un éxito, recurriendo con bastante frecuencia a su frasco de aguardiente. El papel que le había servido de cuña era una carta firmada por «Nicholas Bulstrode», pero no parecía probable que Raffles echara mano de ella, retirándola de la útil posición que ocupaba en aquel momento.

Capítulo XLII

¡Cuánto, creo, podría despreciar a este hombre,
si no fuera porque la caridad me lo prohíbe!

Enrique VIII

Una de las primeras visitas profesionales de Lydgate al regresar de su viaje de bodas fue a Lowick Manor, como consecuencia de una carta en la que se solicitaba su presencia.

El señor Casaubon nunca había hecho preguntas al médico sobre la naturaleza de su enfermedad, ni tampoco había manifestado ante Dorothea la menor preocupación por hasta qué punto aquella dolencia podía acortar sus tareas intelectuales o su vida. En esto, como en todo lo demás, rehuía la compasión; y si ya le amargaba la sospecha de ser compadecido por suposiciones o certezas pese a su continuado silencio, la idea de ser compadecido por reconocer con sinceridad una preocupación o un dolor se le hacía de todo punto intolerable. Toda persona orgullosa comparte en cierta medida esa experiencia, y quizá solo sea posible superarla con un sentimiento de confraternización lo bastante profundo para que los esfuerzos en pos del aislamiento parezcan despreciables y mezquinos en lugar de exultantes.

Las nuevas cavilaciones que ocupaban ahora al señor Casaubon hacían que los interrogantes sobre su salud y su vida obsesionaran su silencio con una importunidad mucho más molesta que la provocada por la inmadurez otoñal de su obra. Es cierto que esta última podía considerarse su ambición fundamental; pero hay algunos tipos de voluntad creadora cuyo fruto más destacado es, con gran diferencia, la desasosegada susceptibilidad que se acumula en la conciencia del autor: se sabe de la existencia del río por unos cuantos hilos de agua entre depósitos seculares de molesto cieno. Eso era lo que sucedía con las arduas tareas intelectuales del señor Casaubon. Su resultado más característico no era la *Llave de todas las mitologías*, sino el convencimiento enfermizo de que otros no le reconocían la preeminencia que él no había merecido de manera demostrable; la sospecha perpetua de que las opiniones que se tenían sobre él no le favorecían; la melancólica ausencia de pasión en los esfuerzos para realizar su obra y una resistencia apasionada a confesar que no había logrado nada.

Por todo ello, la ambición intelectual que, en opinión de otros, había terminado por absorberlo y secarlo, no le proporcionaba en realidad protección alguna contra las heridas, y menos aún contra las que procedían de Dorothea. Y ahora estaba empezando a barruntar posibilidades para el futuro que, de alguna manera, eran para él más amargas que cualquiera de las que había considerado en el pasado.

Su impotencia era total ante hechos como la existencia de Will Ladislaw, su desafiante permanencia en las proximidades de Lowick y su frívola actitud mental en relación con los poseedores de una erudición auténtica, con todas las garantías de seriedad; o como la manera de ser de Dorothea, siempre adoptando alguna nueva forma de ardiente actividad, e incluso cobijando, en la sumisión y en el silencio, convicciones vehementes cuya simple existencia era ya motivo de irritación; o como ciertas ideas y preferencias que habían tomado posesión del pensamiento de su mujer en relación con temas que él no podía de ninguna manera discutir con ella. Dorothea era sin duda una joven todo lo virtuosa y encantadora que cabía desear como esposa; pero las jóvenes resultaban a veces mucho más incómodas de lo que él había supuesto. Dorothea le cuidaba, leía para él, preveía sus deseos y se preocupaba por sus sentimientos; pero el señor Casaubon estaba ya convencido de que su mujer lo juzgaba y de que su devoción de esposa era como una expiación penitente por su incredulidad, acompañada de la capacidad para hacer comparaciones que le

permitían verlo a él y a sus actos con demasiada precisión como parte del mundo en general. El descontento del señor Casaubon atravesaba como una sustancia gaseosa todas las manifestaciones afectuosas de Dorothea, para solidificarse sobre aquel mundo tan poco apreciativo que su mujer solo había logrado acercarle un poco más.

¡Pobre señor Casaubon! Aquel sufrimiento era el más difícil de soportar porque casi le parecía una traición: la joven criatura que le reverenciara con total confianza se había transformado muy pronto en esposa activamente crítica; y ejemplos tempranos de desacuerdo y resentimiento habían producido una impresión que la ternura y sumisión posteriores eran incapaces de disipar. Para su desconfiada manera de interpretar las cosas, el actual silencio de Dorothea era una rebelión reprimida; cualquier observación de su mujer que de alguna manera él no había previsto era una afirmación de superioridad; sus respuestas amables eran irritantemente cautelosas y su asentimiento, cuando se producía, el resultado de una manifiesta voluntad de autodominio. La tenacidad con que el señor Casaubon se esforzaba por ocultar este drama interior lo hacía aún más intenso, de la misma manera que oímos con mayor claridad lo que no deseamos que oigan otros.

En lugar de sorprenderme, los sufrimientos del señor Casaubon me parecen muy normales. ¿No es cierto que una pequeña mancha muy cercana a nuestros órganos de visión eclipsaría la gloria del mundo, dejando ese borrón como única perspectiva? No sé de otra mancha más importuna que el propio yo. ¿Y quién, si el señor Casaubon hubiese optado por exponer su descontento —sus sospechas de que ya no se le adoraba sin mezcla de crítica—, habría podido negar que estaba fundado en sólidas razones? Existía, por el contrario, un importante motivo adicional, que el señor Casaubon no había tenido en cuenta de manera explícita: que él no era adorable sin restricciones. El señor Casaubon lo sospechaba, sin embargo, como sospechaba otras cosas, sin confesarlo y, como el resto de nosotros, se daba cuenta de lo agradable que habría sido tener una compañera que no lo advirtiera nunca.

Esta penosa susceptibilidad en relación con Dorothea estaba ya incubándose antes de que Will Ladislaw regresara a Lowick, y lo sucedido desde entonces había logrado que la capacidad del señor Casaubon para interpretar la realidad de acuerdo con sus sospechas se activara hasta la exasperación. A todos los hechos que conocía, añadía otros imaginarios, presentes y futuros, que llegaban a ser para él más reales que los primeros, porque despertaban una mayor aversión, una amargura más difícil de disipar. Sospechas y celos sobre las intenciones de Will Ladislaw, sospechas y celos acerca de las impresiones recibidas por Dorothea, continuaban entretejiéndose sin descanso. Sería injusto suponer que el señor Casaubon diese credibilidad a cualquier vulgar malentendido sobre la conducta de Dorothea: sus propios hábitos mentales y de comportamiento, tanto como la indudable altura de miras de su mujer, le impedían cometer semejante equivocación. Pero estaba celoso de sus opiniones, de la inclinación que pudiera dar con sus juicios a su inteligencia vehemente y de las posibilidades que todo ello encerraba. En cuanto a Will, aunque hasta su última carta desafiante el señor Casaubon no disponía de nada concreto que alegar contra él, ahora se sentía justificado para creerlo capaz de cualquier maquinación que pudiera fascinar a un temperamento rebelde y a una impetuosidad indisciplinada. Estaba casi seguro de que Dorothea era la causa de que Will hubiese vuelto de Roma y de su decisión de instalarse en aquella zona; y tenía la suficiente penetración para imaginar que Dorothea había colaborado inocentemente para que los acontecimientos siguieran aquel curso. No existía la menor duda de que su mujer estaba preparada para crear vínculos de afecto con Will y para aceptar dócilmente sus sugerencias: no habían tenido ningún *tête-à-tête* sin que ella sacara alguna nueva idea inoportuna, y la última entrevista de la que el señor Casaubon estaba al corriente (Dorothea, al regresar de Freshitt Hall, guardó silencio por primera vez sobre su encuentro con Will) desembocó en una escena cuyo recuerdo suscitaba en él los sentimientos más coléricos que había conocido nunca. La exposición de Dorothea en la oscuridad de la noche sobre sus ideas acerca del dinero tan solo había servido para que los presagios de su marido se volvieran aún más desagradables.

Y siempre presente, con su carga de tristeza, estaba el golpe reciente sobre su salud. Había mejorado mucho, sin duda, y recobrado su capacidad de trabajo; quizá la enfermedad no había sido más que simple fatiga y quizá le quedaran por delante veinte años de realizaciones que justificaran los treinta de preparación. Semejante perspectiva resultaba aún más halagüeña al añadírsele un regusto de venganza contra las precipitadas burlas de Carp y compañía; porque incluso cuando el señor Casaubon caminaba con su vela encendida entre las tumbas del pasado, aquellas figuras modernas venían a disminuir su escasa luz, interrumpiendo sus exploraciones diligentes. Convencer a Carp de su error, y que tuviera que comerse sus propias palabras con una buena dosis de indigestión, sería para su condición de autor triunfante un bienvenido accidente que ni siquiera la perspectiva de seguir vivo en la tierra para las edades futuras y para toda la eternidad en el cielo lograba desterrar como objeto deleitable de contemplación. Y puesto que la

previsión de su propia beatitud eterna no eliminaba el sabor amargo de los celos exacerbados y del deseo de venganza, no es nada sorprendente que la posibilidad de una transitoria felicidad terrena para otras personas, cuando él por su parte se encontrara ya en la gloria, no tuviera un fuerte efecto positivo. Si era cierto que una enfermedad debilitante se hallaba en marcha en su interior, existían abundantes posibilidades de que otras personas fuesen más felices después de que él desapareciera; y si una de esas personas resultara ser Will Ladislaw, la oposición del señor Casaubon a que los acontecimientos tomaran aquel curso era tan grande que parecía como si la indignación fuese a formar parte de su existencia incorpórea.

Esta es una manera muy esquemática y por tanto incompleta de presentar el caso. El alma humana se mueve por muchos canales y el señor Casaubon, como ya sabemos, poseía el sentido de la rectitud y un loable deseo de dar satisfacción a los requisitos del honor que le obligaban a encontrar razones para su conducta distintas de los celos y del espíritu vengativo. El señor Casaubon planteaba la situación de la siguiente manera:

«Al casarme con Dorothea Brooke era mi deber ocuparme de su bienestar para el caso de mi muerte. Pero el bienestar no queda garantizado con la posesión de extensas propiedades; pueden surgir, por el contrario, ocasiones en que semejante posesión la exponga a mayores peligros. Dorothea es presa fácil para cualquier hombre que sepa jugar hábilmente con su ardor afectuoso o con su entusiasmo quijotesco; y hay un hombre que espera precisamente con esa intención; un hombre sin otro principio que sus caprichos pasajeros y que siente una personal animosidad contra mí —de eso estoy seguro—, una animosidad alimentada por la conciencia de su ingratitud y a la que ha dado rienda suelta ridiculizándome, cosa de la que estoy tan seguro como si le hubiese oído en persona. Incluso aunque yo viva, no dejará de preocuparme lo que pueda intentar mediante su influencia indirecta. Ese hombre ha despertado el interés de Dorothea: ha captado su atención; ha tratado de convencerla de que sus derechos van más allá de todo lo que he hecho por él. Si muero —y está esperando aquí para ver si se produce ese final—, la convencerá para que se case con él. Eso sería una calamidad para ella y un gran éxito para él. Dorothea se apega demasiado a las personas, interiormente me reprocha que yo no responda con el mismo entusiasmo, y está ya preocupada por el futuro de Will. Mi primo cuenta con una fácil conquista y con ocupar mi puesto, pero estoy decidido a impedirlo; semejante matrimonio sería fatal para Dorothea. ¿Es que Ladislaw ha perseverado alguna vez en otra cosa que no sea llevar la contraria? Solo le interesa el saber de relumbrón, obtenido con el mínimo esfuerzo. En religión podría ser, mientras le convenga, el fácil eco de las corazonadas de Dorothea. ¿Es que alguna vez se han disociado los conocimientos superficiales de la relajación de las costumbres? Desconfío por completo de su moral y es mi deber impedir por todos los medios que corone con éxito sus planes».

Las disposiciones del señor Casaubon con motivo de su matrimonio le dejaban libertad para tomar importantes medidas, pero al considerarlas, su mente barajaba tanto sus esperanzas de vida que, deseoso de conocerlas con la mayor exactitud posible, superó finalmente su orgullosa reserva y decidió pedir la opinión de Lydgate sobre la naturaleza de su enfermedad.

El señor Casaubon había mencionado a Dorothea que Lydgate iría a Lowick a las tres y media y, en respuesta a su ansiosa pregunta sobre si se encontraba enfermo, replicó:

—No, solo deseo saber su opinión acerca de algunos de mis síntomas habituales. No es necesario que lo recibas, querida. Daré órdenes para que lo lleven al paseo de los tejos, donde estaré haciendo un poco de ejercicio como de ordinario.

Cuando Lydgate entró en el paseo, vio al señor Casaubon que se alejaba lentamente con las manos a la espalda, según su costumbre, y la cabeza inclinada hacia adelante. La tarde era deliciosa; las hojas de los majestuosos tilos caían silenciosamente entre las oscuras plantas de hoja perenne, mientras luces y sombras dormían unas al lado de otras: no se oía otra cosa que el arrullo de las palomas, que para el oído acostumbrado es como una canción de cuna, o como esa otra nana solemne que son los salmos de difuntos. Lydgate, que se sabía poseedor de un cuerpo lleno de energía en los mejores años de la vida, sintió cierta compasión cuando la figura a la que muy pronto iba a dar alcance se volvió y, al dirigirse hacia él, puso de manifiesto con mayor claridad que nunca los signos de un prematuro envejecimiento: la espalda encorvada de los estudiosos, las flacas extremidades y las líneas melancólicas de la boca. «Pobre hombre —pensó—, otros que tienen sus años son como leones, y solo se puede decir de ellos que han alcanzado la plena madurez».

—Señor Lydgate —dijo el señor Casaubon, con su sempiterna cortesía—, le estoy muy agradecido por su puntualidad. Si no tiene inconveniente conversaremos paseando.

—Espero que su deseo de verme no obedezca a la reaparición de síntomas desagradables —dijo Lydgate, llenando una pausa.

—No de manera inmediata. Para explicar este deseo mío, debo mencionar algo a lo que en otras circunstancias no sería necesario hacer referencia y es el hecho de que mi vida, insignificante en todos los demás aspectos, adquiere una posible importancia debido a que aún se hallan incompletos ciertos trabajos que han ocupado mis mejores años. En pocas palabras, tengo entre manos desde hace mucho tiempo una obra que me gustaría dejar preparada, por lo menos, para que pudiera ser dada a la imprenta por… otros. Si estuviese seguro de que esto es lo más que puedo esperar razonablemente, esa seguridad señalaría una limitación útil a mis esfuerzos y me serviría para determinar, tanto de manera positiva como negativa, el curso de mi actividad.

Aquí el señor Casaubon hizo una pausa, retiró una mano de la espalda y la introdujo entre los botones de la chaqueta. Una mente muy familiarizada con el destino humano difícilmente podría encontrar algo más interesante que el conflicto interior encerrado en aquella alocución tan solemne y medida, pronunciada con la habitual cantinela y los acostumbrados movimientos de cabeza. Más aún, ¿es que hay muchas situaciones más sublimemente trágicas que el conflicto de un alma ante la exigencia de renunciar a una obra que ha dado todo el significado a su vida, un significado que dejará tan poco rastro como las aguas que van y vienen allí donde ningún hombre las necesita? Nada había, sin embargo, en el señor Casaubon que resultara sublime para otras personas y Lydgate, que tenía muy a mano cierto desprecio por la vana erudición, advirtió, además de compadecerse, el lado cómico del asunto. El joven médico estaba en aquel momento demasiado poco familiarizado con el desastre para compartir el patetismo de un destino donde todo, con la excepción del apasionado egoísmo del protagonista, estaba por debajo del nivel de la tragedia.

—¿Se refiere usted a los posibles obstáculos por falta de salud? —dijo Lydgate, deseoso de aclarar el propósito del señor Casaubon, a quien parecía detener alguna indecisión.

—Así es. Usted no me ha dado a entender que los síntomas que, debo reconocerlo, observó con escrupuloso cuidado, permitieran diagnosticar una enfermedad mortal. Pero si fuese así, señor Lydgate, desearía conocer la verdad sin reservas y le ruego que me dé una versión fidedigna de sus conclusiones: se lo pido como demostración de amistad. Si está usted en condiciones de decirme que mi vida se halla tan solo amenazada por las contingencias ordinarias, me alegraré por los motivos que ya le he indicado. En el caso contrario, saber la verdad es todavía más importante para mí.

—En ese caso no debo vacilar al responderle —dijo Lydgate—, si bien lo primero que quiero dejar claro es que mis conclusiones son inciertas por un doble motivo: no solo por mi falibilidad, sino también porque con las enfermedades del corazón es muy difícil hacer predicciones. En cualquier caso, apenas es posible aumentar apreciablemente la tremenda incertidumbre de la vida. —El señor Casaubon se sobresaltó a ojos vistas, pero hizo un gesto de conformidad—. Creo que sufre usted de lo que se conoce con el nombre de degeneración grasa del corazón, una enfermedad que fue descubierta y explorada antes que nadie por Laënnec[104], el médico que nos dio el estetoscopio no hace muchos años. Todavía nos falta una buena dosis de experiencia en este asunto; necesitamos una observación más prolongada. Después de lo que me ha dicho, es mi deber comunicarle que en esta enfermedad el fallecimiento se produce con frecuencia de forma repentina. Y que, al mismo tiempo, no es posible predecir tal resultado. Su estado puede muy bien compaginarse con una vida relativamente tranquila durante otros quince años, o incluso más. A esta información solo cabría añadir algunos detalles anatómicos o médicos, que no modificarían en absoluto las expectativas de vida.

El instinto de Lydgate le permitió adivinar que las palabras sencillas, desprovistas de toda ostentosa precaución, serían recibidas por su interlocutor como tributo de respeto.

—Le quedo muy agradecido, señor Lydgate —dijo el señor Casaubon después de una breve pausa—. Todavía tengo que preguntarle una cosa más: ¿comunicó usted a la señora Casaubon lo que ahora acaba de decirme?

—En parte… es decir, en lo que se refiere a la posible evolución de la enfermedad. —Lydgate iba a explicar por qué se lo había contado a Dorothea, pero el señor Casaubon, con un inconfundible deseo de poner fin a la conversación, agitó la mano levemente y dijo de nuevo: «Le estoy muy agradecido», pasando después a comentar la singular belleza del día.

Lydgate, convencido de que su paciente deseaba estar solo, lo dejó en seguida; y la negra figura con las manos a la espalda y la cabeza inclinada hacia adelante siguió recorriendo el paseo donde los oscuros tejos lo acompañaban silenciosamente en su melancolía, y donde las pequeñas sombras de pájaro y hoja que cruzaban velozmente las islas de luz lo hacían en silencio como en presencia de una desgracia. Allí había un hombre que se hallaba ahora por vez primera mirando a la muerte cara a cara; que atravesaba uno de esos singulares momentos de la experiencia en que descubrimos la verdad de un lugar común, que es tan diferente de lo que llamamos conocerlo, como la visión de las aguas sobre la tierra es diferente de la

percepción delirante del agua que no se puede conseguir para refrescar una garganta reseca. Cuando el lugar común «todos tenemos que morir» se transforma repentinamente en la clara conciencia de que «tengo que morir… y pronto», la muerte nos atenaza y sus dedos son crueles; después, quizá venga para estrecharnos en sus brazos como lo hizo nuestra madre, y nuestro postrer momento de oscura percepción terrena sea quizá como el primero. Para el señor Casaubon era como si se encontrara de repente en la orilla oscura del río y oyera el chapoteo del remo que se acerca, sin distinguir las formas pero esperando la llamada. En esa hora el espíritu no modifica las inclinaciones de toda una vida, sino que las lleva con la imaginación al otro lado de la muerte, volviendo la vista atrás, quizá con la calma divina de la caridad, quizá con las mezquinas ansiedades del egoísmo. De cuáles eran las inclinaciones del señor Casaubon nos servirán de indicio sus actos. El marido de Dorothea se consideraba, con algunas restricciones eruditas muy personales, un cristiano creyente en cuanto a la valoración del presente y a las esperanzas de futuro. Pero lo que nos esforzamos por satisfacer, aunque lo llamamos esperanza distante, es un deseo inmediato: la situación futura por la que los hombres se afanan en las calles de la ciudad ya existe en su imaginación y en su amor. Y los deseos inmediatos del señor Casaubon no eran lograr, desprovisto de todo condicionamiento terreno, la luz y la comunión con la divinidad; sus apasionados anhelos, pobre hombre, pendían a poca altura y confusamente de lugares muy sospechosos.

Dorothea, al percatarse de la marcha de Lydgate, salió de inmediato al jardín, dispuesta a acompañar a su marido. Luego vaciló, temiendo ofenderlo con una presencia no deseada; porque su ardor, continuamente rechazado, servía, junto con su memoria que todo lo retenía, para reforzar su miedo, como la energía reprimida se transforma en estremecimiento; de manera que paseó despacio entre los grupos más cercanos de árboles hasta que lo vio. Entonces se acercó a él, y podría haber representado a un ángel enviado del cielo que llegara con la promesa de que las breves horas restantes estarían llenas de ese amor fiel que se hace aún más intenso ante el sufrimiento comprendido. La mirada del señor Casaubon en respuesta a la suya fue tan helada que Dorothea sintió crecer su timidez; se volvió, sin embargo, para cogerlo del brazo.

El señor Casaubon retuvo las manos a la espalda y solo permitió que el brazo dúctil de su esposa se adhiriera con dificultad al suyo rígido.

Había algo horrible para Dorothea en el dolor que aquella cruel indiferencia le causaba. Son estas palabras muy fuertes, pero no demasiado fuertes: en los actos llamados triviales es donde las semillas de la felicidad se echan a perder para siempre, hasta que hombres y mujeres contemplan a su alrededor con rostro demacrado la desolación que ellos mismos han causado y dicen que la tierra ya no produce cosechas de dulzura… llamando así conocimiento a su propia negativa. Se puede preguntar por qué, en nombre de la virilidad, el señor Casaubon tuvo que comportarse de aquella manera. Piénsese que era un hombre que rechazaba la compasión: hay que tener en cuenta el efecto sobre aquel espíritu de la sospecha de que su sufrimiento pudiera convertirse en fuente de satisfacción, presente o futura, para el ser que ya le había ofendido con su compasión. Además, el señor Casaubon sabía muy poco de las sensaciones de Dorothea, y no había reflexionado sobre el hecho de que, en una ocasión como aquella, eran comparables en intensidad a las que él experimentaba ante las críticas de Carp.

Dorothea no apartó el brazo, pero no se atrevió a hablar. El señor Casaubon no dijo: «Deseo estar solo», pero dirigió sus pasos en silencio hacia la casa y, al atravesar la puerta de cristales del lado este, Dorothea retiró el brazo y se detuvo un momento sobre el felpudo, para dejar a su marido completamente libre. El señor Casaubon entró en la biblioteca y se encerró dentro, a solas con su dolor.

Dorothea subió al *boudoir*. Por el mirador abierto llegaba la gloria serena de la tarde en la avenida, donde los tilos proyectaban largas sombras. Pero Dorothea no se daba cuenta de nada y se derrumbó en una silla, sin importarle que cayeran sobre ella los rayos deslumbrantes del sol: si aquello la molestaba, ¿cómo podía saber que no era parte de su sufrimiento interior?

Todo su ser era presa de una cólera rebelde más fuerte que nada de lo que había experimentado desde su boda. En lugar de lágrimas eran palabras lo que brotaba de ella: «¿Qué es lo que he hecho… qué me pasa… para que tenga que tratarme así? Nunca sabe qué pienso… Tampoco le interesa. ¿De qué sirve nada de lo que yo haga? Desearía no haberse casado conmigo».

Al oírse hablar en voz alta se contuvo y guardó silencio. Como alguien que se ha extraviado y está cansado, permaneció inmóvil contemplando al mismo tiempo todos los senderos de su esperanza juvenil, que ya nunca volvería a recorrer. Y con la misma claridad vio bajo la luz de la infelicidad su soledad y la de su marido: cómo caminaban separados y ella se veía obligada a convertirlo en objeto de estudio. Si él se hubiera acercado, habría sido distinto; nunca se hubiese preguntado: «¿Merece la pena vivir para él?», sino que lo habría considerado simplemente parte de su propia vida. Ahora Dorothea decía con amargura: «La

culpa es suya, no mía». En el choque sufrido por todo su ser, la compasión quedaba destronada. ¿Era falta suya haber creído en él, haber creído en sus méritos…? Y ¿qué era el señor Casaubon exactamente? Dorothea estaba capacitada para valorarlo… ella, que esperaba sus miradas entre temblores y había encarcelado lo mejor de su alma, haciéndole tan solo visitas a escondidas, para resultar así lo bastante insignificante como para agradarle. En crisis como esta algunas mujeres comienzan a odiar.

El sol ya estaba casi en el horizonte cuando Dorothea decidió enviar un recado a su marido diciéndole que no se encontraba bien y que prefería quedarse en el piso alto. Nunca se había dejado dominar por el resentimiento, pero estaba convencida de que no podría verlo de nuevo sin contarle la verdad de sus sentimientos, y tenía que esperar a poder hacerlo sin interrupciones. Quizá le sorprendiera su recado y se sintiese herido. Estaría bien que se sorprendiera y se sintiera herido. La cólera le dijo a Dorothea, como suele suceder con la cólera, que Dios estaba de su parte; que todo el paraíso, aunque en él se amontonaran las almas contemplándolos, tenía que estar de su parte. Había decidido ya tocar la campanilla cuando oyó que llamaban a la puerta.

El señor Casaubon le mandaba decir que cenaría en la biblioteca. Deseaba estar solo aquella noche, por hallarse muy ocupado.

—En ese caso no cenaré, Tantripp.

—Señora, ¡permítame que le traiga algo!

—No; no me encuentro bien. Déjalo todo preparado en el vestidor, pero haz el favor de no volver a molestarme.

Dorothea se quedó quieta, meditando, mientras el atardecer se transformaba poco a poco en noche. Sus esfuerzos cambiaban de continuo, como los de un hombre que inicia un movimiento dirigido a golpear y termina dominando ese deseo. La energía necesaria para un delito es la misma que se necesita para lograr un sometimiento sin condiciones cuando se reafirman tendencias más nobles del alma. La idea con que Dorothea había salido al encuentro de su marido, su convencimiento de que este había estado inquiriendo sobre la posible interrupción de toda su obra, y de que la respuesta debía de haberle encogido el corazón, no podía tardar en alzarse junto a la imagen de él, como un fantasma admonitor que contemplara su cólera y la reconviniera con tristeza por su conducta. Fue necesaria una letanía de pesadumbres imaginadas y lágrimas silenciosas para que Dorothea llegara a sentir compasión por aquellas penas… Finalmente se produjo el sometimiento; y cuando la casa se hallaba en silencio, y ella sabía que era casi la hora en que el señor Casaubon se retiraba normalmente a descansar, abrió la puerta de su cuarto suavemente y se quedó fuera en la oscuridad esperando a que su marido subiera la escalera con una luz en la mano. Pensó incluso, si no aparecía pronto, en bajar y en arriesgarse a recibir otra punzada dolorosa. Jamás esperaría ya otra cosa. Luego oyó abrirse la puerta de la biblioteca y lentamente la luz avanzó hacia la escalera sin ruido de pasos sobre la alfombra. Cuando el señor Casaubon llegó frente a ella vio que el rostro de su marido estaba aún más demacrado. Él se sobresaltó ligeramente al verla, y ella lo miró suplicante, sin hablar.

—¡Dorothea! —exclamó, con un amable tono de sorpresa en la voz—. ¿Me estabas esperando?

—Sí; no quería molestarte.

—Ven, querida, ven. Tú eres joven y no necesitas alargarte la vida con vigilias.

Cuando la serena y amable melancolía de aquellas palabras penetró en los oídos de Dorothea, sintió algo parecido a la gratitud que surgiría en nosotros si hubiéramos evitado por muy poco herir a una criatura lisiada. Dorothea tomó la mano de su marido y los dos avanzaron por el amplio corredor.

Libro quinto

La mano muerta

Capítulo XLIII

Esta figura tiene un precio muy elevado: fue trabajada con amor
hace mucho tiempo en el mejor de los marfiles;
nada hay en ella que obedezca a la moda, tan solo líneas puras y nobles
de generosa feminidad, válida para todas las épocas.
También ese es un objeto de mucho precio; cerámica
de hábil diseño, capaz de complacer los gustos de un aristócrata:
la sonrisa, como se ve, es perfecta… maravillosa
¡no es más que loza fina, claro está!, ornamento para una mesa
digno de que lo rodeen las cosas más lujosas.

Dorothea salía muy pocas veces de casa sin su marido, pero de vez en cuando iba sola en coche a Middlemarch, para hacer compras o pequeñas obras de caridad, como acostumbra cualquier dama de elevada posición cuando vive a menos de cinco kilómetros de una ciudad. Dos días después de la escena en el paseo de los tejos, la señora Casaubon decidió utilizar una de aquellas oportunidades para tratar de ver a Lydgate y enterarse de si su marido había notado algún cambio desalentador en sus síntomas, cambio que a ella le ocultaba y, también, si había insistido en conocer todos los detalles de su enfermedad. Dorothea se sentía casi culpable pidiendo información sobre el señor Casaubon a otra persona, pero el temor al desconocimiento —a una ignorancia que la hiciese injusta o dura— venció todos sus escrúpulos. Estaba segura de que se había producido una crisis espiritual en su marido: al día siguiente de su entrevista con Lydgate, el señor Casaubon adoptó un nuevo método para ordenar sus notas, y asoció inmediatamente a su mujer en la realización de aquel plan. La pobre Dorothea necesitaba acumular grandes provisiones de paciencia. Eran alrededor de las cuatro cuando se puso en camino hacia la casa de Lydgate en Lowick Gate, lamentando, al surgirle de inmediato dudas sobre la posibilidad de encontrarlo en casa, no haberle escrito antes. Y, efectivamente, el médico había salido.

—¿Está la señora Lydgate en casa? —preguntó Dorothea, que, si bien no creía haber visto nunca a Rosamond, recordó en aquel momento el reciente matrimonio. Sí, la señora Lydgate estaba en casa.

—Me gustaría hablar con ella, si fuera posible. ¿Quiere preguntarle si puede verme… si puede recibir a la señora Casaubon unos minutos?

Al marcharse la criada para transmitir su recado, Dorothea oyó sonidos musicales a través de una ventana abierta: algunas notas cantadas por una voz masculina y un piano haciendo trémolos. Luego la música se interrumpió de repente y la criada volvió en seguida para decir que la señora Lydgate la recibiría con mucho gusto.

Cuando se abrió la puerta del salón y entró Dorothea, se hizo aparente un contraste que era frecuente en la vida rural cuando las costumbres de las distintas categorías sociales se diferenciaban más que ahora. Dejemos a los expertos la identificación exacta de la tela del vestido que llevaba Dorothea en aquellos días templados de otoño, un fino tejido blanco como de lana suave al tacto y agradable a la vista. Siempre parecía recién lavado y que olía a hierbas aromáticas, y adoptaba una forma como de túnica con mangas muy anchas totalmente pasadas de moda. Si la señora Casaubon se hubiera presentado ante un público teatral como Imogen o como la hija de Catón[105], el vestido podría haber parecido adecuado; la elegancia y la dignidad se hallaban en las extremidades y en el cuello de Dorothea; y, en torno a sus cabellos, sencillamente partidos en dos y a sus ojos llenos de sinceridad, la amplia y redonda papalina que formaba por entonces parte del sino de las mujeres no resultaba un tocado más extraño que ese plato dorado sobre la

cabeza de los santos al que llamamos halo. En cuanto al público presente en aquella ocasión, formado tan solo por dos personas, ninguna heroína dramática habría sido esperada con más interés que la señora Casaubon. Para Rosamond se trataba de una de las divinidades de la aristocracia local que no se mezclaban nunca con los mortales de Middlemarch y cuyos más mínimos detalles de comportamiento y apariencia eran dignos de estudio; además, a Rosamond no dejaba de agradarle que la señora Casaubon tuviera una oportunidad de estudiarla a ella. ¿De qué le sirve a una mujer la exquisitez si no la ven los mejores jueces? Y es que desde los encendidos elogios recibidos en casa de sir Godwin Lydgate, Rosamond tenía plena confianza en la impresión que producía entre las personas distinguidas. Dorothea tendió la mano con su habitual amabilidad desprovista de afectación, y contempló admirativamente a la encantadora esposa de Lydgate, consciente de que había un caballero de pie a cierta distancia, pero viéndolo como una figura muy en segundo término. El caballero estaba demasiado ocupado con la presencia de una de las damas para reflexionar sobre el contraste entre las dos, contraste que habría resultado sin duda llamativo para un observador sereno. Las dos eran altas, y sus ojos se hallaban al mismo nivel; pero imagínese la infantil belleza rubia de Rosamond y la maravillosa corona que formaban sus cabellos trenzados, junto con un vestido azul celeste tan a la moda y tan perfectamente cortado que ninguna modista podría verlo sin sentir emoción; un gran cuello bordado del que cabía esperar que todos los que lo viesen supieran el precio; unas manos pequeñas convenientemente realzadas con sortijas; y esa timidez en el comportamiento que, bien dosificada, es el costoso sucedáneo de la sencillez.

—Muchas gracias por permitirme interrumpirla —dijo Dorothea inmediatamente—. Necesito ver al señor Lydgate antes de volver a casa, si es posible, y he pensado que quizá usted pueda decirme dónde encontrarlo, o me permita que lo espere aquí, si cree que volverá pronto.

—Está en el hospital nuevo —dijo Rosamond—; no sé con seguridad cuándo volverá a casa, pero puedo mandar a buscarlo.

—¿Quiere usted que vaya yo? —dijo Will Ladislaw, acercándose. Ya se había quitado el sombrero antes de que entrara Dorothea.

La señora Casaubon se ruborizó, sorprendida, pero le tendió la mano con una sonrisa de sincera alegría, diciendo:

—No sabía que fuese usted: no pensaba verlo aquí.

—¿Le parece que vaya al hospital y le diga al señor Lydgate que quiere verlo? —preguntó Will.

—Sería más rápido mandar el coche —dijo Dorothea—, si es usted tan amable de darle el recado al cochero.

Will se dirigía ya hacia la puerta cuando Dorothea, en cuya mente surgieron en un instante muchos recuerdos entrelazados, se volvió muy deprisa y rectificó:

—Iré yo misma, muchas gracias. Quiero perder el menor tiempo posible antes de volver a casa. Veré al señor Lydgate en el hospital. Discúlpeme, señora Lydgate. Le quedo muy agradecida.

Sin duda se le había ocurrido algo de repente y abandonó el cuarto sin casi darse cuenta de lo que tenía alrededor, ni de que Will le abría la puerta y le ofrecía el brazo para llevarla hasta el coche. Dorothea aceptó su ayuda pero guardó silencio. Will se sentía más bien incómodo y desdichado y no se le ocurrió nada que decir. Le dio la mano para subir al coche, se despidieron y Dorothea se alejó calle arriba.

Durante los cinco minutos de trayecto hasta el hospital, la señora Casaubon tuvo tiempo de hacerse algunas reflexiones completamente nuevas. Su decisión de marcharse y su preocupación al salir del cuarto habían surgido de la repentina sensación de que estaría incurriendo en el engaño si se permitía cualquier nueva comunicación con Will sin informar a su marido; por añadidura, la expedición misma en busca de Lydgate debía mantenerse oculta. Eso era todo lo que estaba explícitamente en su imaginación; pero también se había sentido empujada por un desasosiego menos preciso. Ahora que se hallaba a solas en el coche, oyó de nuevo la voz masculina y el piano que la acompañaba, voz y piano a los que apenas había prestado atención, y se descubrió sorprendiéndose de que Will Ladislaw hiciera compañía a la señora Lydgate en ausencia de su marido. Y a continuación no pudo por menos de recordar que Ladislaw también había pasado algún tiempo con ella en similares circunstancias; luego, ¿por qué tenía que haber algo de incorrecto en aquellas visitas? Will era pariente del señor Casaubon, y una persona con la que Dorothea estaba obligada a mostrarse amable. Sin embargo, existían signos que quizá ella debería haber interpretado como indicios de que a su marido no le agradaban las visitas de su primo en ausencia suya. «Quizá he estado equivocada en muchas cosas», se dijo la pobre Dorothea mientras empezaban a brotar de sus ojos unas lágrimas que tuvo que secarse a toda prisa. Se sentía vagamente desgraciada, y la imagen de Will, que hasta entonces había tenido para ella un contorno nítido, quedó misteriosamente empañada. El coche se detuvo ante el portón del hospital y la señora Casaubon estuvo muy pronto paseando por el césped con

Lydgate, movida de nuevo por la intensa preocupación que la había llevado a buscar aquella entrevista.

Will Ladislaw, mientras tanto, se sentía muy incómodo y sabía claramente cuál era la razón. Sus oportunidades de ver a Dorothea eran muy escasas y por primera vez había surgido una que lo colocaba en una posición nada ventajosa. No era tan solo, como en anteriores ocasiones, que ella no se ocupara de él con total dedicación, sino que lo había visto en circunstancias que podían crear la impresión de que él no se ocupaba exclusivamente de ella. Sintió que ahora se encontraba a mayor distancia de Dorothea, por haberse incorporado a círculos sociales de Middlemarch que no formaban parte de su vida. Si bien aquello no era culpa suya: desde que se alojaba en la ciudad había procurado relacionarse, como era lógico, con el mayor número posible de personas, ya que su posición requería que lo conociera todo y a todo el mundo. Lydgate era sin duda la persona más interesante entre sus vecinos y tenía además una mujer aficionada a la música y a la que merecía la pena visitar. Aquella era toda la historia de la situación en la que Diana se había aparecido de forma demasiado inesperada ante su devoto admirador. Era humillante. Will sabía muy bien que estaba en Middlemarch por Dorothea y, sin embargo, su posición en la ciudad amenazaba con separarlo de ella, interponiendo esas barreras de la costumbre que son peores para la perseverancia en el mutuo interés que toda la distancia que separa Roma de Gran Bretaña. Los prejuicios sobre rango y posición eran fáciles de desafiar cuando adoptaban la forma de carta tiránica del señor Casaubon; pero los prejuicios, como los cuerpos olorosos, tienen una doble existencia, sólida y sutil al mismo tiempo: sólidos como las pirámides, sutiles como el vigésimo eco de un sonido o como el recuerdo de unos jazmines que en otro tiempo llenaron de aroma la oscuridad. Y el temperamento de Will le hacía sentir vivamente la presencia de tales sutilezas; un hombre de más torpes percepciones no habría advertido como él que, por vez primera, había surgido en la mente de Dorothea la sensación de que había algo incorrecto en una relación totalmente espontánea como la suya y que su silencio, mientras la acompañaba hasta el coche, había tenido un componente de frialdad. Quizá Casaubon, llevado por el odio y los celos, había insistido en que Will se hallaba ahora en una posición social por debajo de la suya. ¡Maldito Casaubon!

Ladislaw volvió a entrar en el salón, recogió el sombrero y dijo con aire irritado mientras avanzaba hacia la señora Lydgate:

—Siempre da pésimos resultados interrumpir la música o la poesía. ¿Puedo volver en otro momento para terminar la interpretación de *Lungi dal caro bene*?

—Me encantará que me la enseñe —dijo Rosamond—. Y estoy segura de que admitirá usted que se ha tratado de una interrupción muy bella. Le envidio muchísimo su amistad con la señora Casaubon. ¿Es muy inteligente? Da la impresión de serlo.

—A decir verdad, nunca he pensado en ello —dijo Will, malhumorado.

—Esa es precisamente la respuesta que me dio Tertius cuando le pregunté si era hermosa. ¿En qué piensan ustedes, los caballeros, cuando están con la señora Casaubon?

—En ella misma —dijo Will, a quien no le parecía mal molestar, bromeando, a la encantadora señora Lydgate—. Cuando uno ve a una mujer perfecta, nunca piensa en sus atributos… tan solo es consciente de su presencia.

—Me sentiré celosa cada vez que Tertius vaya a Lowick —dijo Rosamond, luciendo sus hoyuelos y hablando con etérea frivolidad—. Cuando vuelva a casa le resultaré insignificante.

—No parece que hasta ahora haya sido ese el efecto. La señora Casaubon es demasiado distinta a otras mujeres para que pueda comparársela con ellas.

—Veo que es usted su devoto adorador. Supongo que la ve con frecuencia.

—No —dijo Will, casi con aire displicente—. La adoración suele ser una cuestión de teoría más que de práctica. Y ahora mismo la estoy practicando en exceso… No tengo más remedio que ausentarme.

—Por favor, vuelva cualquier tarde; al señor Lydgate le gustará oír la música y yo no disfruto tanto si no está mi marido.

Cuando el joven médico volvió a casa, Rosamond, situada frente a él y cogiéndole del cuello de la chaqueta con las dos manos, dijo:

—El señor Ladislaw estaba aquí cantando conmigo cuando entró la señora Casaubon. Pareció molestarse. ¿Crees que le desagradó que ella lo viera en nuestra casa? Sin duda tu posición es tan buena como la suya o más… cualquiera que sea su relación con los Casaubon.

—No, no; tiene que haber sido otra cosa si estaba realmente molesto. Ladislaw es más bien un bohemio errante; no le interesan nada los ringorrangos.

—Dejando la música a un lado, no siempre resulta muy agradable. ¿Tú tienes buena opinión de él?

—Sí; creo que es una excelente persona: un tanto disperso y frívolo, pero simpático.

—¿Sabes?, creo que adora a la señora Casaubon.

—¡Pobre diablo! —dijo Lydgate, sonriendo y pellizcando las orejas de su mujer.

Rosamond sentía que empezaba a saber muchas cosas sobre el mundo, especialmente por haber descubierto que las mujeres pueden hacer conquistas y esclavizar a los hombres incluso después del matrimonio, cosa que le habría parecido inconcebible cuando era soltera, excepto como tragedia sombría en trajes de otra época. En aquellos momentos las señoritas de las zonas rurales, aunque se hubiesen educado con la señora Lemon, leían muy poca literatura francesa posterior a Racine, y los periódicos no habían arrojado aún su magnífica iluminación actual sobre los escándalos de la vida cotidiana. La vanidad, en cualquier caso, con todo el día a su disposición para trabajar sobre el espíritu de una mujer ociosa, puede extraer abundantes conclusiones de pequeños indicios, especialmente si los indicios ponen de manifiesto la posibilidad de un número indefinido de victorias. ¡Qué delicioso resultaba hacer conquistas desde el trono del matrimonio, con un marido como príncipe consorte al lado —súbdito también él—, mientras los cautivos alzaban la vista sin esperanza, perdiendo probablemente el sueño y mucho mejor aún si perdían además el apetito! En el momento presente las ilusiones románticas de Rosamond giraban sobre todo en torno a su príncipe coronado y le bastaba con disfrutar de su segura sumisión. Cuando Lydgate exclamó «¡pobre diablo!», ella quiso saber, con traviesa curiosidad:

—¿Por qué dices eso?

—Porque ¿qué puede hacer un hombre cuando le da por adorar a una de vosotras, sirenas? Descuida su trabajo y acumula facturas.

—Estoy segura de que tú no descuidas tu trabajo. Estás siempre en el hospital o viendo pacientes pobres, o pensando en alguna disputa entre médicos; y luego, cuando llegas a casa, quieres trabajar con el microscopio y los tubos de ensayo. Confiesa que esas cosas te gustan más que yo.

—¿No tienes ambición suficiente para desear que tu marido llegue a ser algo mejor que médico de Middlemarch? —dijo Lydgate, poniendo las manos sobre los hombros de su mujer y mirándola con afectuosa seriedad—. Haré que te aprendas mi pasaje favorito de un viejo poeta:

> *¿Por qué ha de crear nuestro orgullo tanto revuelo para ser*
> *y ser olvidado? ¿Qué bien puede compararse*
> *con hacer honor a la palabra escrita y escribir,*
> *honrar la lectura y el deleite del mundo?*[106]

Lo que yo quiero, Rosy, es hacer honor a la palabra escrita y escribir yo mismo lo que he hecho. Un hombre tiene que trabajar para eso, cariño.

—Quiero, claro está, que hagas descubrimientos; nadie desea más que yo que consigas un puesto en otro sitio de acuerdo con tus méritos. No puedes decir que yo haya tratado nunca de poner obstáculos a tu trabajo. Pero no podemos vivir como ermitaños. No estarás disgustado conmigo, ¿verdad Tertius?

—No, querida, no. No podría estar más satisfecho.

—¿Qué era lo que la señora Casaubon quería decirte?

—Tan solo informarse sobre la salud de su marido. Creo que va a ser muy espléndida con nuestro hospital nuevo: me parece que nos dará doscientas libras al año.

Capítulo XLIV

> No avanzaré lentamente a lo largo de la costa, sino que navegaré mar adentro, guiándome por las estrellas.

Cuando Dorothea, paseando con Lydgate entre los macizos de laurel en el hospital nuevo, supo que no había cambios en el estado de salud del señor Casaubon, con la excepción del síntoma mental de la inquietud que sentía por conocer la verdad sobre su mal, guardó silencio durante unos momentos, preguntándose si habría dicho o hecho algo para provocar aquella nueva preocupación. Lydgate, que no quería dejar pasar la oportunidad de impulsar uno de sus proyectos favoritos, se atrevió a decir:

—No sé si alguien habrá llamado su atención o la de su marido sobre las necesidades de nuestro hospital nuevo. Las circunstancias han hecho que parezca más bien egoísta por mi parte insistir en este asunto; la culpa no es mía: se debe a una campaña que están haciendo contra esta institución otros profesionales de la medicina. Creo que a usted le interesan estas cosas, porque recuerdo que cuando tuve el placer de conocerla en Tipton Grange antes de su matrimonio, me hizo algunas preguntas acerca de los efectos, sobre la salud de los pobres, de las casas miserables en las que viven.

—Es cierto —dijo Dorothea, animándose—. Le estaré muy agradecida si me dice cómo puedo ayudar a mejorar un poco las cosas. Todo eso ha quedado desplazado desde mi matrimonio. Quiero decir —añadió, después de un momento de vacilación— que las gentes de nuestro pueblo viven con relativa comodidad y he tenido la cabeza demasiado ocupada para hacer más averiguaciones. En cambio aquí… en un sitio como Middlemarch… debe de haber mucho que hacer.

—Queda todo por hacer —dijo Lydgate con brusca energía—. Y en esa tarea este hospital es una pieza importantísima, debida por completo a los esfuerzos del señor Bulstrode y en gran parte también a su dinero. Pero un hombre solo no puede sacar adelante un proyecto de estas dimensiones. Él contaba, por supuesto, con que se le prestara ayuda. Y ahora hay una intriga mezquina contra el hospital, organizada en la ciudad por ciertas personas que desean verlo fracasar.

—¿Qué razones pueden tener? —preguntó Dorothea con ingenua sorpresa.

—Sobre todo la impopularidad del señor Bulstrode. La mitad de la ciudad haría casi lo que fuera con tal de verlo fracasar. En este mundo estúpido la mayor parte de la gente no considera que algo merezca la pena, a no ser que lo hagan personas de su camarilla. Yo no tenía ninguna relación con Bulstrode antes de venir aquí. Lo miro con total imparcialidad y veo que tiene ideas y que ha puesto en pie cosas que yo puedo utilizar para el bien público. Si un número razonable de hombres bien formados se pusieran a trabajar con el convencimiento de que sus observaciones pueden contribuir a la reforma de la teoría y de la práctica de la medicina, veríamos muy pronto cambios positivos. Ese es mi punto de vista. Sostengo que negándome a trabajar con el señor Bulstrode estaría dando la espalda a una oportunidad de hacer que mi profesión sea más útil para un mayor número de personas.

—Estoy totalmente de acuerdo con usted —dijo Dorothea, fascinada de inmediato por la situación que esbozaban las palabras de Lydgate—. Pero ¿qué es lo que tienen en contra del señor Bulstrode? Sé que mi tío está en buenas relaciones con él.

—A la gente no le gusta su matiz religioso —dijo Lydgate, sin añadir más explicaciones.

—Esa es una razón todavía más poderosa para desdeñar semejante oposición —dijo Dorothea, mirando los asuntos de Middlemarch a la luz de las grandes persecuciones.

—Para presentar el asunto con toda imparcialidad hay que decir que existen otras objeciones: el señor

Bulstrode es despótico, bastante poco sociable, y se ocupa del comercio, un sector que también tiene sus quejas, quejas de las que yo no sé nada en absoluto. Pero ¿qué relación existe entre eso y la cuestión de si es bueno crear aquí un hospital mejor que cualquiera de los del condado? El motivo directo de la oposición es, sin embargo, el hecho de que Bulstrode me haya confiado la dirección médica del establecimiento. Por supuesto, yo me alegro de ello. Me da la oportunidad de realizar un buen trabajo… y sé que tengo que hacer honor a la confianza puesta en mí. La consecuencia es que todos los médicos de Middlemarch se han unido para luchar con uñas y dientes contra el hospital y no solo se niegan a cooperar, sino que tratan de denigrar el proyecto e impedir que se hagan donaciones.

—¡Qué cosa tan mezquina! —exclamó Dorothea, llena de indignación.

—Supongo que siempre hay que contar con la oposición para avanzar por el camino que nos hemos trazado: apenas existe actividad en la que no aparezca. Y la ignorancia de la gente por estos alrededores es increíble. Yo afirmo tan solo que he disfrutado de oportunidades que no están al alcance de todo el mundo; pero no hay manera de que pasen por alto la ofensa de ser joven y recién llegado y de saber algo más que quienes viven aquí desde siempre. De todas formas, como creo que puedo lograr mejores métodos de tratamiento y continuar ciertas observaciones e investigaciones que supondrán un beneficio duradero para la práctica de la medicina, sería un adulador despreciable si permitiera que consideraciones de comodidad personal influyesen sobre mí. Y el camino queda aún mucho más claro al no existir recompensa económica de ninguna clase que haga sospechoso mi empeño por seguir adelante.

—Me alegro de que me haya explicado el problema, señor Lydgate —dijo Dorothea cordialmente—. Creo que puedo ayudar un poco. Tengo algún dinero, y no saber cómo usarlo hace que con frecuencia me sienta incómoda. Estoy en condiciones de destinar doscientas libras al año para un gran proyecto como ese. ¡Qué feliz debe de ser usted conociendo cosas de las que sabe a ciencia cierta que van a hacer mucho bien! Quisiera poder levantarme con ese convencimiento todas las mañanas. ¡Son tantos los esfuerzos que se hacen sin que parezca salir apenas nada bueno de ellos! —Había una entonación melancólica en la voz de Dorothea mientras pronunciaba aquellas últimas palabras. En seguida añadió, con tono más alegre—: Por favor, venga usted a Lowick cuando pueda y cuéntenos más cosas sobre esa iniciativa. Hablaré de ello con el señor Casaubon. Ahora tengo que volver a casa inmediatamente.

Dorothea mencionó el hospital a su marido durante la velada y dijo que le gustaría aportar doscientas libras: contaba con setecientas al año, recibidas como dote al casarse, a modo de equivalente de su fortuna personal. El señor Casaubon no hizo otra objeción que un breve comentario sobre la posibilidad de que aquella suma fuese desproporcionada en relación con otras buenas obras, pero cuando Dorothea, en su ignorancia, rechazó la sugerencia, le dio su aprobación. No le importaba gastar dinero y no se resistía a darlo. Si alguna vez sentía vivamente las cuestiones de dinero era por estar relacionadas con otra pasión distinta del interés por las posesiones materiales.

Dorothea le contó que había visto a Lydgate y explicó lo más importante de su conversación sobre el hospital. El señor Casaubon no le hizo más preguntas, aunque tuvo el convencimiento de que Dorothea había querido enterarse de lo sucedido entre Lydgate y él. «Sabe que lo sé», dijo la voz que nunca descansaba dentro de él; pero aquel nuevo convencimiento tácito solo sirvió para disminuir aún más la confianza entre ellos. El señor Casaubon desconfiaba del afecto de Dorothea; y ¿existe acaso una soledad más solitaria que la desconfianza?

Capítulo XLV

> El carácter de muchas personas las empuja a exaltar la época de sus antecesores, y a perorar contra la iniquidad de los tiempos presentes, cosa que no podrían llevar a buen término sin la ayuda y el espíritu satírico de tiempos pasados; al condenar los vicios de su propio tiempo mediante la expresión de los vicios de las épocas que exaltan, no hacen más que demostrar la comunidad de vicios entre ambos períodos. Por tanto, Horacio, Juvenal y Persio no eran profetas, aunque sus versos parecieran dirigirse y señalar a nuestra época.
>
> SIR THOMAS BROWNE, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*

La oposición contra el hospital nuevo, que Lydgate había esbozado ante Dorothea, podía enfocarse, al igual que otras oposiciones, desde puntos de vista muy diversos. El joven médico la veía como una mezcla de celos y de prejuicios estúpidos. El señor Bulstrode no la consideraba tan solo una cuestión de celos médicos, sino que advertía en ella, más que otra cosa, la decidida voluntad de molestarlo, surgida sobre todo del odio a la religión viva que él se esforzaba por representar con eficacia: un odio que sin duda encontraba pretextos ajenos a la religión, pretextos que eran bien fáciles de hallar en la maraña de las acciones humanas. Podría decirse que esas eran las opiniones de las personas cultas. La oposición, por otro lado, tiene a su alcance el ilimitado abanico de las objeciones que ni siquiera necesitan aceptar los límites impuestos por el conocimiento, ya que se alimentan eternamente con la inmensidad de la ignorancia. Lo que decía la oposición en Middlemarch sobre el hospital nuevo y su administración estaba en buena parte formado por ecos, porque el cielo se ha encargado de que no todo el mundo sea un creador; aunque había diferencias que representaban todos los matices sociales, desde la refinada moderación del doctor Minchin, hasta las cortantes afirmaciones de la señora Dollop, la propietaria de La Jarra de Cerveza, en Slaughter Lane.

La señora Dollop se fue convenciendo cada vez más, gracias a sus propias aseveraciones, de que el señor Lydgate tenía intención de dejar morir a la gente en el hospital, si es que no los envenenaba, con el fin de poder cortarlos en trozos sin encomendarse ni a Dios ni al diablo; porque era un hecho conocido que había querido despedazar a la señora Goby, una mujer tan respetable como la que más de la calle Parley; una mujer que tenía fortuna propia antes de casarse…: una historia bien triste para un médico, que si era competente debía averiguar lo que padecías antes de morirte, en lugar de curiosear en tus entrañas cuando ya habías pasado a mejor vida. Si aquella no era una buena razón, la señora Dollop quería que alguien le diese otra; entre sus oyentes existía el sentimiento generalizado de que la opinión de la señora Dollop era un baluarte, y que si fuera derribado sería imposible poner límites al despedazamiento de los cuerpos, como se había visto claramente en el caso de Burke y Hare[107] con sus emplastos de pez… ¡Nadie quería crímenes como aquellos en Middlemarch!

Y nadie suponga que la opinión de La Jarra de Cerveza, en Slaughter Lane, carecía de importancia para la profesión médica: aquella taberna tan antigua como auténtica —la genuina jarra de cerveza, conocida con el nombre de Dollop's— era el punto de reunión de un gran club de prestaciones sociales que meses antes había celebrado una votación para ver si destituían a su médico de muchos años, el doctor Gambit, para que ocupara su puesto aquel doctor Lydgate que era capaz de realizar las curaciones más asombrosas y que lograba restablecer a personas desahuciadas por otros médicos. El resultado, sin embargo, se volvió contra Lydgate por el voto de dos miembros, quienes por razones particulares mantenían que el poder de resucitar a personas prácticamente muertas era una dudosa recomendación y podía impedir la concesión de favores providenciales. En el transcurso del año, sin embargo, se había producido un cambio en la opinión

pública, de la que era índice la unanimidad que reinaba en Dollop's.

Bastante más de un año antes, cuando aún no se sabía nada sobre la competencia profesional de Lydgate, los juicios estaban ya divididos según un sentido de la probabilidad (situado quizá en la boca del estómago o en la glándula pineal) que difería en sus veredictos, pero que, dada la total ausencia de pruebas, no era menos valioso como guía. Los pacientes que tenían enfermedades crónicas o cuya salud estaba ya muy maltrecha, como en el caso del viejo Featherstone, se habían sentido inmediatamente inclinados a probar; lo mismo sucedía con muchos pacientes que no gustaban de pagar las visitas del médico, aunque siempre estaban dispuestos a abrir cuenta con un nuevo doctor y a mandar a buscarlo sin restricciones si la destemplanza de los niños exigía un remedio, contingencia en la que los médicos antiguos se mostraban con frecuencia remisos; todas las personas propensas a emplear a Lydgate por esas razones se inclinaban a pensar que era inteligente. Algunos consideraban que podría hacer más que otros en el caso de dolencias relacionadas con el hígado; por lo menos no habría nada de malo en recibir los frascos de medicinas que él les diese, ya que si demostraban su inutilidad siempre sería posible volver a las píldoras purificadoras, que lo mantenían a uno vivo, aunque no quitaran el tinte amarillo de la piel. Pero esas eran personas de menor importancia. Las familias destacadas de Middlemarch, como es lógico, no iban a cambiar de médico sin una buena razón; y todos los que habían utilizado los servicios del señor Peacock no se sentían obligados a aceptar a un médico nuevo simplemente por considerarlo su sucesor, arguyendo que «no era probable que fuese tan bueno como Peacock».

Antes de que Lydgate pasara mucho tiempo en la ciudad ya se contaba de él lo suficiente para alimentar esperanzas mucho más precisas e intensificar las diferencias hasta llegar al partidismo, aunque algunos datos concretos pertenecieran a la notable categoría de aquellos cuyo significado permanece totalmente oculto, como una cifra estadística sin un criterio para valorarla, pero con signos de admiración al principio y al final. Los metros cúbicos de oxígeno que respira anualmente un hombre adulto… ¡qué estremecimiento podrían haber producido en algunos círculos de Middlemarch! «¡Oxígeno! Nadie sabe qué sea eso… ¿A quién puede sorprender que el cólera haya llegado a Danzig? ¡Y todavía hay personas que consideran que las cuarentenas no sirven para nada!».

Uno de los hechos que empezaron muy pronto a rumorearse fue que Lydgate no administraba medicamentos. Aquello resultaba ofensivo tanto para los doctores en medicina, de cuyos privilegios parecía olvidarse, como para los simples médicos, entre los que se contaba; y muy poco tiempo antes unos y otros podrían haber contado con el apoyo de la ley contra un hombre que sin ser doctor en medicina por Londres osaba reclamar honorarios en lugar de cobrar tan solo por los medicamentos que administraba. Lydgate, además, no tenía la experiencia suficiente para prever que sus nuevos métodos podían resultar aún más ofensivos para las personas corrientes, y cometió la imprudencia de dar al señor Mawmsey, un importante tendero del mercado municipal que, aun sin ser uno de sus pacientes, le preguntó con afabilidad sobre aquel asunto, una apresurada explicación de carácter popular, señalando que, si la única manera de que los médicos se hicieran pagar por su trabajo era presentar largas facturas de pociones, píldoras y mixturas, la consecuencia sería el deterioro de su prestigio y un constante perjuicio para los pacientes.

—De esa forma médicos muy trabajadores pueden llegar a ser casi tan perjudiciales como los curanderos —dijo Lydgate irreflexivamente—. Para ganarse el pan han de dar dosis demasiado fuertes a los vasallos del rey y esa es una terrible traición, señor Mawmsey… Debilita el organismo de manera fatal.

El señor Mawmsey no solo era capataz (el motivo de la entrevista con Lydgate era un asunto de salarios rurales), sino que padecía de asma y tenía una familia cada vez más numerosa; así que, desde un punto de vista médico y también desde el suyo propio, era un hombre importante; a decir verdad, un tendero excepcional, con el pelo arreglado en una pirámide con aspecto de llama y cuya deferencia de comerciante al por menor era del tipo cordial, alentador, inclinada al halago jocoso y con cierta cortés resistencia a poner de manifiesto su gran capacidad intelectual. La jocosa amabilidad del señor Mawmsey provocó el tono de la respuesta de Lydgate. Sirva esto de advertencia a las personas prudentes contra una excesiva disposición a dar explicaciones, multiplicando así las fuentes del error: al alargar la suma consiguen que quienes hacen la operación se equivoquen sin remedio.

Lydgate sonrió al terminar la parrafada, poniendo el pie en el estribo, y el señor Mawmsey rio más que si hubiese sabido quiénes eran los vasallos del rey, despidiéndose del médico con el aire del que lo entiende todo con suficiente claridad. Sus certezas, sin embargo, habían quedado trastornadas. Llevaba años pagando cuentas en las que solo figuraban medicamentos, de manera que por cada media corona y dieciocho peniques estaba seguro de haber recibido algo que podía ser medido. El señor Mawmsey había hecho aquel gasto con satisfacción, incluyéndolo entre sus responsabilidades de marido y padre y aceptando una cuenta más larga de lo normal como un motivo de orgullo que merecía ser mencionado. Además, junto con el

imponente beneficio de los medicamentos para él y su familia, el señor Mawmsey había disfrutado con el placer de emitir juicios muy sagaces sobre sus efectos inmediatos, con lo que se hallaba en condiciones de hacer un comentario inteligente para orientación del señor Gambit, un médico un poco por debajo de Wrench o Toller en consideración social, especialmente apreciado como partero, y de cuyo talento en todas las demás cosas de la vida el señor Mawmsey tenía una opinión pobrísima, pero que, en cuanto a recetas, según acostumbraba decir el tendero en voz muy baja, había que colocarlo por encima de todos los demás.

Aquellas eran razones más profundas que las palabras apresuradas de un médico nuevo, palabras que sonaron aún más endebles en el salón encima de la tienda, cuando le fueron transmitidas a la señora Mawmsey, una mujer habituada a disfrutar de muchas consideraciones como madre prolífica y que, en general, era atendida a intervalos variables por el señor Gambit, aunque tuviera en ocasiones ataques que requerían la presencia del doctor Minchin.

—¿Es que ese señor Lydgate quiere decir que las medicinas no sirven de nada? —dijo la señora Mawmsey, que tenía cierta tendencia a arrastrar las palabras—. Me gustaría que me explicara cómo podría yo soportar los días de la feria si no tomara una medicina vigorizante desde un mes antes. ¡Piensa en lo que tengo que servir a los clientes que nos visitan! —Aquí la señora Mawmsey se volvió hacia una íntima amiga que estaba a su lado—. ¡Una empanada grande de ternera, un solomillo relleno, un redondo de vaca, jamón, lengua, etcétera, etcétera! Pero lo que me mantiene mejor es la mixtura rosa, no la de color marrón. Me sorprende, Mawmsey, que con toda tu experiencia lo escucharas con calma. Yo le habría dicho al instante que estaba un poco mejor informada.

—No, no, no —respondió el señor Mawmsey—; yo no iba a darle mi opinión. Óyelo todo y juzga por tu cuenta, es mi lema. El señor Lydgate no sabía con quién estaba hablando. A mí no se me maneja tan fácilmente. La gente pretende con frecuencia explicarme cosas, cuando lo mismo podrían decir: «Mawmsey, eres un estúpido». Yo sonrío: prefiero llevarle la corriente a todo el mundo. Si las medicinas nos hubiesen hecho daño a mí y a mi familia a estas alturas, ya lo habría notado.

Al día siguiente se informó al señor Gambit —un hombre fornido y corpulento con una gran sortija en el dedo anular— de que Lydgate iba por ahí diciendo que las medicinas no servían para nada.

—¡Vaya! —dijo él, alzando las cejas con cauta sorpresa—. ¿Cómo cura entonces a sus pacientes?

—Eso es lo que yo digo —replicó la señora Mawmsey, que de ordinario daba peso a sus palabras apoyándose en los pronombres—. ¿Se figura que los enfermos van a pagarle por venir a hacerles compañía?

La señora Mawmsey se había pasado mucho tiempo oyendo hablar al señor Gambit de cosas tales como detalladas descripciones de sus propios hábitos corporales además de otros asuntos; Gambit, por supuesto, sabía que la mujer del tendero no estaba haciendo ninguna insinuación con su comentario, ya que nunca le había cobrado ni su tiempo libre ni sus anécdotas personales. De manera que contestó, en tono de broma:

—Bueno, Lydgate es un joven bien parecido, no sé si se ha dado usted cuenta.

—No sería yo quien utilizara sus servicios —dijo la señora Mawmsey—. Otras, que hagan lo que les plazca.

De aquí que el señor Gambit pudiera dejar la casa del importante tendero sin temor a una posible rivalidad, aunque con la sensación de que Lydgate era uno de esos hipócritas que trataban de desacreditar a otros proclamando su propia honradez y que quizá a algunas personas les mereciera la pena ponerlo en evidencia. El señor Gambit, sin embargo, tenía una clientela satisfactoria, muy invadida por los olores del comercio al por menor, lo que implicaba que a veces los pagos se hacían en especie y no al contado. No creyó que le mereciera la pena poner a Lydgate en evidencia hasta que supiera cómo hacerlo. De hecho no poseía grandes recursos de educación y había tenido que abrirse camino luchando contra una buena dosis de menosprecio profesional; era, en cualquier caso, un buen partero, aunque su pronunciación de las palabras cultas dejara a veces un tanto que desear.

Otros médicos sí se sentían con más recursos. El señor Toller contaba con buena parte de la mejor clientela de la ciudad y pertenecía a una antigua familia de Middlemarch: había personas apellidadas Toller en las diferentes ramas del derecho y en todas las profesiones por encima del nivel de los comerciantes al por menor. A diferencia de nuestro irascible amigo el señor Wrench, Toller se tomaba con la mayor tranquilidad del mundo las cosas que podría suponerse que le molestaban, ya que era un hombre bien educado, con un plácido sentido del humor, propietario de una buena casa, aficionado a ir de cacería cuando se presentaba la oportunidad, muy amigo del señor Hawley y hostil al señor Bulstrode. Quizá parezca extraño que un hombre tan aficionado a la buena vida se inclinara por el tratamiento heroico, haciendo sangrías, aplicando ventosas y matando de hambre a sus pacientes, y pasara por alto imparcialmente su ejemplo personal; aquella incongruencia contribuía a aumentar su prestigio entre los pacientes, que señalaban a menudo su tendencia a la pereza, para añadir de inmediato que sus tratamientos

eran todo lo activos que cabía desear: nadie, decían, aportaba mayor seriedad a su profesión; tardaba un poco en llegar, pero cuando se presentaba, hacía algo. Era un hombre muy popular dentro de su propio círculo, y cualquier cosa que insinuara en detrimento de alguien, resultaba doblemente eficaz por el tono despreocupadamente irónico que adoptaba.

Como es lógico, llegó a cansarse de sonreír y de decir «¡ah!» cada vez que alguien le comunicaba que el sucesor del señor Peacock no tenía intención de administrar medicinas; y un día, al mencionarlo el señor Hackbutt cuando tomaban vino después de una cena a la que habían sido invitados, el señor Toller dijo riendo:

—En ese caso Dibbitts podrá librarse de sus medicinas atrasadas. Me resulta muy simpático el pequeño Dibbitts; me alegro de que tenga suerte.

—Entiendo lo que quiere decir, Toller —dijo el señor Hackbutt—, y soy enteramente de su misma opinión. Buscaré una oportunidad para expresarme en ese sentido. Un médico debe ser responsable de la calidad de los medicamentos que consumen sus pacientes. Esa es la razón de ser del sistema de cobrar por ellos que ha prevalecido hasta ahora; y no hay nada más ofensivo que este alarde de reforma cuando no existe una mejora real.

—¿Alarde, Hackbutt? —dijo el señor Toller, irónicamente—. Yo no lo veo así. Una persona no está en condiciones de alardear de algo en lo que nadie cree. No hay ninguna reforma en este asunto: la cuestión es si el beneficio por la venta de los medicamentos se lo paga al médico el boticario o el paciente y si debe haber una compensación económica distinta por la atención médica.

—¡Claro, naturalmente! Una de esas malditas nuevas versiones de las viejas patrañas —dijo el señor Hawley, pasando el vino al señor Wrench.

El señor Wrench, abstemio por regla general, con frecuencia bebía mucho en las cenas a las que se le invitaba, volviéndose irritable como consecuencia de ello.

—En cuanto a patrañas, Hawley —dijo—, esa es una palabra que no cuesta mucho trabajo arrojar sobre los demás. Yo protesto de la manera en que algunos médicos tiran piedras contra su propio tejado y dicen a gritos por todo el país que si un médico general administra medicamentos no puede ser un caballero. Rechazo esa acusación con desprecio. Digo que lo que no tiene nada de caballeroso es presentarse entre los miembros de la propia profesión con innovaciones que son una calumnia contra procedimientos sancionados por el tiempo. Esa es mi opinión, y estoy dispuesto a mantenerla contra cualquiera que me contradiga. —La voz del señor Wrench se había vuelto extraordinariamente cortante.

—Siento no estar de acuerdo con usted en eso, Wrench —dijo el señor Hawley, metiendo las manos en los bolsillos del pantalón.

—Mi querido amigo —dijo el señor Toller, interviniendo como pacificador y mirando al señor Wrench —, a los doctores se los está ofendiendo más que a nosotros. Si saca usted a relucir la dignidad, eso es un problema para Minchin y Sprague.

—¿Acaso la jurisprudencia médica no dispone algo para esas infracciones? —dijo el señor Hackbutt con el desinteresado deseo de ofrecer sus talentos—. ¿Qué es lo que dice la ley, Hawley?

—No hay nada que hacer en ese sentido —dijo el señor Hawley—. Estuve estudiando el asunto para Sprague. Solo serviría para romperse la cabeza contra la decisión de un condenado juez.

—¡Bah!, no nos hace falta ninguna ley —dijo el señor Toller—. En lo que se refiere al ejercicio de la medicina ese intento es una cosa absurda. No le gustará a ningún enfermo… y desde luego menos que a nadie a los pacientes de Peacock, que estaban acostumbrados a la reducción de líquidos. Páseme el vino.

La predicción del señor Toller se cumplió en parte. Si el señor y la señora Mawmsey, que no tenían intención de llamar a Lydgate, se intranquilizaron por sus supuestas declaraciones contra los medicamentos, era inevitable que a quienes sí recurrían a sus servicios les preocupara comprobar si el nuevo médico «utilizaba todos los medios a su alcance» en cada caso. Incluso al bueno del señor Powderell, que en su constante interpretación caritativa de la realidad se inclinaba a tener a Lydgate en mayor aprecio por lo que parecía una concienzuda búsqueda de un tratamiento más satisfactorio, le perturbaron las dudas a raíz del ataque de erisipela que sufrió su mujer, y no pudo por menos de mencionar a Lydgate que el señor Peacock, en una ocasión similar, había administrado una serie de píldoras a las que solo podía definir por sus notables efectos, ya que, para últimos de septiembre, habían curado a la señora Powderell de una enfermedad iniciada en un día muy caluroso del mes de agosto. Finalmente, dividido entre el deseo de no herir a Lydgate y el temor a que no se utilizaran todos los «medios» posibles, convenció privadamente a su mujer para que tomase las píldoras purificadoras de Widgeon, un remedio muy apreciado en Middlemarch, que detenía todas las enfermedades en su origen porque empezaba a trabajar inmediatamente en la sangre. Aquella medida cooperativa no debía comunicarse a Lydgate y el mismo señor Powderell no tenía gran

seguridad en sus efectos: tan solo confiaba en que la acompañasen las bendiciones del cielo.

En aquella incierta etapa de su introducción en Middlemarch, Lydgate se vio ayudado por eso que los mortales calificamos irreflexivamente de buena fortuna. Supongo que ningún médico ha llegado nunca a un sitio nuevo sin llevar a cabo curaciones que sorprendieran a alguien; curaciones a las que se podría llamar cartas testimoniales de la fortuna y que merecen tanta consideración como las que están escritas o han sido impresas. Diferentes enfermos se pusieron bien mientras Lydgate los atendía, algunos incluso que tenían dolencias peligrosas; y se comentó que el médico nuevo, con sus métodos nuevos, tenía el mérito de salvar a personas que estaban ya con un pie en la sepultura. Los disparates que se decían en tales ocasiones resultaban aún más molestos para Lydgate, ya que proporcionaban precisamente la clase de prestigio que desearía un hombre incompetente y sin escrúpulos y que sus colegas, predispuestos contra él, atribuirían sin duda a que procuraba estimular la ignorancia más exagerada. Si bien hasta su orgullosa franqueza se vio frenada por el descubrimiento de que era tan inútil luchar contra las interpretaciones de la ignorancia como pelearse con la niebla; y la «buena suerte» insistía en usar esas interpretaciones.

La señora Larcher, al sentirse caritativamente preocupada por los síntomas alarmantes que presentaba su asistenta, precisamente cuando el doctor Minchin llegó para verla a ella, le pidió que la reconociera allí mismo y que le diera un certificado para la enfermería u hospital viejo, por lo que, después de examinarla, el doctor redactó el diagnóstico calificando el caso de tumor y recomendando, para que se la tratase como enferma ambulatoria, a la interesada, Nancy Nash. Nancy, al pasar por su casa de camino de la enfermería, permitió que el corsetero y su mujer, en cuyo ático se alojaba, leyeran la nota del doctor Minchin, convirtiéndose de esta manera en tema de compasivas conversaciones en las tiendas vecinas de Churchyard Lane por padecer un tumor del que se decía en un principio que era tan grande y duro como un huevo de pato, pero que al avanzar el día alcanzó las dimensiones de un puño. La mayor parte de los presentes se mostraban de acuerdo en que sería necesario extirparlo, aunque el aceite, según uno, y un cocimiento de grama, según otro, eran buenos medios para ablandar y reducir cualquier bulto corporal si se tomaban en cantidad suficiente: el aceite flexibilizándolo gradualmente y el cocimiento de grama desgastándolo.

Mientras tanto, Nancy se presentó en la enfermería uno de los días en que Lydgate pasaba consulta. Después de hacerle unas preguntas y de examinarla, Lydgate le dijo al interno en voz baja: «No es un tumor, sino un calambre». Le recetó un emplasto y una mixtura y le dijo que se fuera a su casa a descansar, dándole al mismo tiempo una nota para la señora Larcher, quien, según dijo la misma Nancy, era su mejor patrona, explicándole que su asistenta necesitaba comida de buena calidad.

A la larga, sin embargo, Nancy, en su ático, empeoró muchísimo, ya que el supuesto tumor cedió efectivamente ante el emplasto, pero solo para marcharse a otra zona del cuerpo y producir dolores más fuertes. La mujer del corsetero fue a buscar a Lydgate, que siguió atendiendo a Nancy en su casa durante quince días, hasta que con su tratamiento se puso bien del todo y volvió al trabajo. De todos modos, en Churchyard Lane y en otras calles se siguió hablando del tumor de Nancy; incluso la señora Larcher lo calificaba así; porque cuando se informó al doctor Minchin del notable éxito de Lydgate, no sintió, como es lógico, deseos de decir: «No era un caso de tumor y yo me equivoqué al diagnosticarlo como tal», sino que respondió: «¡Vaya! Me di cuenta de que era un caso quirúrgico, aunque no de naturaleza mortal». El doctor Minchin se había sentido interiormente contrariado, sin embargo, cuando al preguntar en la enfermería por la mujer que había recomendado dos días antes, supo por el interno, un jovencito muy dispuesto a molestar a Minchin impunemente, lo que había ocurrido. De manera privada Minchin declaró que era impropio de un simple médico contradecir el diagnóstico de un doctor de forma tan manifiesta, y más adelante estuvo de acuerdo con Wrench en que Lydgate mostraba una desagradable indiferencia en cuestiones de protocolo. Lydgate no utilizó el asunto como base para hacerse valer ni mucho menos para despreciar a Minchin, ya que tales rectificaciones de juicios equivocados se producen a menudo entre personas de equivalente categoría profesional. Pronto se extendió, sin embargo, la fama del sorprendente caso del tumor, al que no se distinguía claramente del cáncer y al que se consideraba aún más pernicioso por pertenecer al tipo de los movibles; hasta el punto de que muchos de los prejuicios contra el método de Lydgate en lo relativo a los medicamentos quedaron olvidados ante la prueba de su maravillosa habilidad en la rápida recuperación de Nancy Nash después de haber estado retorciéndose con dolores agudísimos causados por la presencia de un tumor que, pese a ser duro y obstinado, se había visto obligado a ceder.

¿Qué podía hacer Lydgate? Resulta ofensivo decirle a una dama, cuando expresa su admiración por nuestra habilidad profesional, que está totalmente equivocada y que su asombro es bastante tonto. Y descender a explicar la naturaleza de las enfermedades solo hubiese significado una infracción más del decoro médico. No le quedaba más remedio que aceptar en silencio la perspectiva de un éxito basado en alabanzas ignorantes que pasan por alto todas las cualidades válidas.

En el caso de un enfermo más notorio, el señor Borthrop Trumbull, Lydgate no ignoraba que se había mostrado superior a los médicos corrientes, aunque también aquí la ventaja conseguida era de dudoso valor. El elocuente subastador había caído en cama con neumonía y, por haber sido cliente del señor Peacock, mandó llamar a Lydgate, a quien explicó su intención de convertirlo en su médico de cabecera. El señor Trumbull era un hombre robusto, excelente material para ensayar con él la teoría expectante: observar el curso de una enfermedad cuando se la dejaba a su aire lo más posible, a fin de poder anotar sus diferentes etapas y utilizar las observaciones realizadas como guía para el futuro; y por la manera en que Trumbull describía sus sensaciones, Lydgate supuso que le gustaría disfrutar de la confianza de su médico y considerarse colaborador de su propia curación. El subastador oyó, sin mucha sorpresa, que su excelente constitución permitiría (siempre con la debida vigilancia) la no intervención del médico, para ofrecer un hermoso ejemplo de una enfermedad con todas sus fases claramente delineadas, así como que él, probablemente, poseía la rara fortaleza mental para experimentar en su cuerpo, de manera voluntaria, un método racional, convirtiendo de aquel modo el trastorno de sus funciones pulmonares en un beneficio para la sociedad en general.

El señor Trumbull aceptó inmediatamente y apoyó con gran energía la idea de que una enfermedad suya no era una ocasión corriente para la ciencia médica.

—No tenga usted ningún miedo, señor Lydgate; no está hablando con alguien completamente ignorante de la *vis medicatrix* —dijo, con su habitual riqueza de expresión, que resultaba un tanto patética dadas las dificultades que encontraba para respirar. El subastador soportó sin vacilaciones la abstinencia de medicamentos, muy reconfortado por la aplicación del termómetro, que resaltaba la importancia de su temperatura, por el convencimiento de que proporcionaba material para el microscopio y por el aprendizaje de muchas palabras nuevas que parecían muy de acuerdo con la dignidad de sus secreciones. Porque Lydgate tuvo la agudeza de obsequiarlo con algunas explicaciones técnicas.

Ya puede suponerse que el señor Trumbull se levantó de la cama muy dispuesto a hablar de una enfermedad en la que había puesto de manifiesto su fortaleza mental además de su buena constitución; y no se mostró remiso a dar el debido crédito al médico que había advertido la calidad del paciente con quien tenía que tratar. El subastador no era hombre desprovisto de generosidad y le gustaba dar a los demás lo que les correspondía, convencido de que podía permitírselo. Había captado las palabras «método expectante» y echó al vuelo las campanas con aquella y otras frases eruditas para acompañar la afirmación de que Lydgate «sabía un par de cosas más que el resto de los médicos… que era mucho más versado en los secretos de su profesión que la mayoría de sus colegas».

Aquello sucedió antes de que la enfermedad de Fred Vincy diera unos motivos personales más definidos a la enemistad del señor Wrench. El recién llegado amenazaba con convertirse en un rival muy incómodo y suponía, ya sin duda, una molestia por sus críticas en el terreno de la práctica o sus reflexiones sobre sus azacaneados colegas, que habían tenido otras ocupaciones más importantes que interesarse por ideas puramente experimentales. La clientela de Lydgate se había extendido por uno o dos barrios y, desde el primer momento, el hecho de que perteneciera a una familia distinguida había servido para que le invitara casi todo el mundo, de manera que los demás médicos se encontraban con él a la hora de cenar en las mejores casas y no está comprobado que tener que tratar con un hombre que nos desagrada termine siempre creando sentimientos de afecto mutuo. De hecho, nunca se había dado tanta unanimidad entre ellos como al opinar que Lydgate era un joven arrogante y, sin embargo, capaz de mostrar ante Bulstrode un rastrero servilismo con el fin de medrar. Que el señor Farebrother, cuyo nombre era la principal enseña del partido contrario a Bulstrode, siempre defendiera a Lydgate y fuese amigo suyo, se atribuía a la inexplicable costumbre que tenía Farebrother de luchar en ambos lados.

Todo esto supuso abundante preparación para el estallido de indignación profesional producido al anunciarse las normas que el señor Bulstrode estaba dictando para la dirección del hospital nuevo, que resultaban todavía más exasperantes por cuanto no existía ninguna posibilidad real de poner obstáculos a su voluntad, ya que todo el mundo, con la excepción de lord Medlicote, se había negado a colaborar económicamente en la construcción del edificio, con la excusa de que preferían subvencionar la vieja enfermería. El señor Bulstrode había sufragado todos los gastos y ya no lamentaba haber adquirido el derecho a poner en práctica sus ideas de reforma sin estorbos por parte de colaboradores llenos de prejuicios, aunque hubiera tenido que desembolsar grandes cantidades y se hubiese retrasado la terminación del edificio. Caleb Garth lo había tomado a su cargo, había fracasado durante la marcha del proyecto, y se había retirado de la administración antes de que comenzara el equipamiento interior; pero al referirse al hospital decía con frecuencia que, si bien Bulstrode quizá sonara a falso si se le ponía a prueba, le gustaban la buena carpintería y la sólida albañilería y tenía buenas ideas tanto sobre desagües como

sobre chimeneas. De hecho, el hospital se había convertido en objeto de gran interés para Bulstrode, y aunque de buen grado hubiese continuado destinando una elevada cantidad todos los años para poder gobernarlo dictatorialmente sin junta directiva de ninguna clase, tenía otro proyecto favorito que también necesitaba dinero para su realización, y que era la compra de tierras en los alrededores de Middlemarch, por lo que deseaba lograr otras contribuciones importantes para el mantenimiento del hospital. Mientras tanto formuló su plan de administración. El nuevo establecimiento sanitario quedaría reservado para las fiebres en todas sus formas; Lydgate sería director jefe de los servicios médicos y tendría plena libertad para llevar a cabo las investigaciones comparativas cuya importancia había podido descubrir en el curso de sus estudios, particularmente los realizados en París, mientras los demás médicos, con categoría de externos, tendrían una influencia consultiva, pero no poder ejecutivo para oponerse a las decisiones de Lydgate; la administración general, por otro lado, quedaba exclusivamente en manos de cinco directores asociados con el señor Bulstrode, con un número de votos en concordancia con sus aportaciones; la misma junta directiva se ocuparía de cubrir cualquier vacante que se produjera en sus filas, sin admitir a toda una hueste de benefactores de poca importancia a participar en el gobierno del hospital.

Todos los médicos se negaron de inmediato a convertirse en externos del hospital nuevo.

—Muy bien —le dijo Lydgate al señor Bulstrode—, tenemos un cirujano residente de primera calidad que también es farmacéutico: un individuo con una cabeza muy clara y gran habilidad práctica; conseguiremos a Webbe, de Crabsley, que es tan buen médico rural como cualquiera de ellos, para que venga dos veces por semana y, en el caso de alguna operación excepcional, Protheroe acudirá desde Brassing. Yo tendré que trabajar más, eso es todo, y ya he renunciado a mi puesto en la vieja enfermería. El plan saldrá adelante a pesar de ellos, y con el tiempo se incorporarán gustosamente. Las cosas no pueden durar tal como están; muy pronto se producirán reformas de todo tipo y entonces quizá los jóvenes quieran venir a estudiar aquí. —Lydgate estaba lleno de optimismo.

—Yo no me echaré atrás; de eso puede estar seguro, Lydgate —dijo Bulstrode—. Mientras le vea llevando a la práctica sus elevados propósitos con vigor renovado, contará usted con todo mi apoyo. Y confío humildemente en que no cesen las bendiciones que se han derramado hasta ahora sobre mis esfuerzos contra el espíritu del mal en esta ciudad. No tengo la menor duda de que conseguiré buenos directores para que me asistan en la tarea. El señor Brooke de Tipton ya me ha dado su consentimiento, y ha prometido hacer una contribución anual: no ha especificado la suma… probablemente no muy cuantiosa. Será, de todos modos, un miembro muy útil de la junta directiva.

Quizá habría que definir al miembro útil como alguien que nunca propusiera nada y votase siempre de acuerdo con el señor Bulstrode.

Para entonces la aversión médica hacia Lydgate apenas llegaba a disimularse. Ni el doctor Sprague ni el doctor Minchin decían que les desagradasen los conocimientos de Lydgate, ni su interés por mejorar los tratamientos: lo que les disgustaba era su arrogancia, defecto del que nadie pensaba que el joven médico estuviese completamente libre. Los doctores daban a entender que era insolente, pretencioso e inclinado a las innovaciones temerarias por el gusto del ruido y de la exhibición, que constituye la esencia del charlatanismo.

La palabra «charlatán», una vez arrojada a la arena, no podía ya retirarse. En aquellos días el mundo estaba muy agitado con motivo de las prodigiosas actividades del señor St John Long[108], «noble y caballero», atestiguadas por la extracción de un fluido similar al mercurio de las sienes de un paciente.

El señor Toller hizo notar un día, sonriendo, a la señora Taft, que «Bulstrode había encontrado en Lydgate al hombre que necesitaba; a un charlatán en materia de religión tienen por fuerza que gustarle los charlatanes de otro tipo».

—Sí, claro, me lo imagino perfectamente —dijo la señora Taft, conservando en la cabeza durante todo el tiempo la cifra de treinta puntos—; no hay muchos de esa especie. Me acuerdo del señor Cheshire, con sus hierros, que trataba de enderezar a la gente cuando el Todopoderoso los había hecho encorvados.

—No, no —dijo el señor Toller—, lo de Cheshire estaba perfectamente… todo muy correcto y sin engaños. Pero ahí está St John Long: esa es la clase de individuo al que llamamos charlatán, porque promete curaciones por métodos que nadie conoce: un tipo que quiere organizar un revuelo pretendiendo llegar más a fondo que otras personas. Hace poco fingió agujerear el cerebro de un hombre y sacar mercurio de su interior.

—¡Santo cielo! ¡Qué manera más horrible de jugar con la salud de la gente! —dijo la señora Taft.

Después de aquello llegó a asegurarse en varios sitios que Lydgate se servía incluso de la salud de personas respetables para sus propios fines, y a comentarse cuántas probabilidades había de que en sus alocados experimentos hiciera de su capa un sayo con los pacientes del hospital. Sobre todo cabía esperar,

como había dicho la patrona de La Jarra de Cerveza, que despedazase cadáveres sin el menor miramiento. Porque Lydgate, después de haber atendido a la señora Goby, que murió, al parecer, de una enfermedad del corazón que no quedó claramente expresada en los síntomas, pidió permiso con demasiada audacia a sus familiares para abrir el cadáver, causando con ello una ofensa de la que se tuvo muy pronto noticia más allá de la calle Parley, donde aquella señora había residido mucho tiempo, manteniéndose gracias a unos saneados ingresos que convertían la asociación de sus restos mortales con las víctimas de Burke y Hare en flagrante insulto a su memoria.

Tal era la situación cuando Lydgate habló del hospital con Dorothea. Hemos visto que soportaba la enemistad y las ideas erróneas con gran presencia de ánimo, sabedor de que se debían en parte al considerable éxito obtenido con su trabajo profesional.

—No conseguirán echarme —dijo, hablando de manera confidencial en el despacho del señor Farebrother—. Dispongo de una buena oportunidad para conseguir los fines que más me interesan; y estoy razonablemente seguro de obtener los ingresos necesarios para nuestras necesidades. A la larga llevaré una vida tranquila: no tengo tentaciones que me aparten ni de mi casa ni de mi trabajo. Y cada vez estoy más convencido de que será posible demostrar el origen homogéneo de todos los tejidos. Raspail[109] y otros siguen el mismo camino y yo no he aprovechado bien el tiempo.

—Carezco de poder de profecía al respecto —dijo el señor Farebrother, que había estado fumando en pipa pensativamente mientras hablaba Lydgate—; por lo que respecta a la hostilidad de la ciudad, podrá superarla si es usted prudente.

—¿Cómo puedo ser prudente? —dijo Lydgate—; solo hago lo que no tengo más remedio que hacer. No estoy en condiciones de evitar la ignorancia y el rencor de la gente, como tampoco lo estuvo Vesalio[110]. No es posible ajustar la propia conducta a estúpidas conclusiones que nadie puede prever.

—Muy cierto; no me refería a eso, sino a otras dos cosas. La primera es que se mantenga usted lo más lejos que pueda de Bulstrode; por supuesto, siga haciendo el bien con ayuda suya, pero no se ate. Quizá parezca que respiro por la herida al decirlo, y hay una buena dosis de eso, lo reconozco, pero los sentimientos personales no siempre están equivocados si se condensan en las impresiones que hacen de ellos una simple opinión.

—Bulstrode no significa nada para mí —dijo Lydgate, con despreocupación—, excepto en asuntos públicos. En cuanto a llegar a unirme estrechamente con él, no le tengo tanto cariño. Pero ¿cuál es la otra cosa a la que ha hecho usted referencia? —continuó el joven médico, que había colocado las piernas a la altura más cómoda posible y no sentía gran necesidad de que le dieran consejos.

—Bien, no es más que esto: tenga cuidado, *experto crede*, tenga cuidado de no crearse obstáculos por cuestiones económicas. Sé, por ciertas palabras que se le escaparon un día, que desaprueba que yo juegue a las cartas por dinero. Tiene usted toda la razón. Procure, por su parte, no incurrir en pequeñas deudas que no pueda pagar. Quizá no hace ninguna falta que le diga todo esto, aunque a cualquiera le gusta presumir de superioridad sobre sí mismo sacando a relucir sus malos ejemplos y lanzando sermones acerca de ellos.

Lydgate aceptó de buen grado las indicaciones del señor Farebrother, aunque difícilmente las hubiera soportado viniendo de otra persona. No olvidaba que había contraído poco antes algunas deudas, que, en su caso, le habían parecido inevitables; de allí en adelante se proponía mantener su casa de la manera más simple posible. No sería necesario renovar los muebles que aún no había pagado; ni tampoco la provisión de vino durante una larga temporada.

Había muchas cosas que le alegraban en aquel momento… y justificadamente. Un hombre entusiasmado con nobles proyectos se siente apoyado, ante mezquinas hostilidades, por el recuerdo de grandes trabajadores que tuvieron que luchar para abrirse camino y recibieron heridas; hombres que están presentes en su pensamiento como santos patrones, ayudándolo invisiblemente. Ya en su casa, la misma tarde en que había estado charlando con el señor Farebrother, Lydgate tenía las piernas estiradas sobre el sofá, la cabeza echada hacia atrás y las manos en la nuca, de acuerdo con su postura favorita para cavilar, mientras Rosamond interpretaba al piano una melodía tras otra, de las que su marido sabía únicamente (debido a su dura epidermis para las cuestiones artísticas) que estaban tan de acuerdo con su estado de ánimo como si se tratara de melodiosas brisas marinas.

Había algo magnífico en el aspecto de Lydgate en aquel momento, y cualquiera se hubiera sentido impulsado a apostar por su éxito. En sus ojos oscuros y en su boca y en su frente brillaba esa placidez que nace de la plenitud del pensamiento contemplativo: la mente más que buscar, ve, y la mirada parece llenarse con lo que queda tras las pupilas.

Al cabo, Rosamond dejó el piano y fue a sentarse en una silla cercana al sofá, frente a su marido.

—¿Tienes bastante con la música que has oído, mi dueño y señor? —dijo, cruzando las manos y

adoptando una expresión sumisa levemente burlona.

—Sí, querida, si estás cansada —dijo Lydgate amablemente, volviendo los ojos para mirarla pero sin cambiar de postura. En aquel momento la presencia de Rosamond no era quizá más que una cucharada añadida al lago, y el instinto femenino de la señora Lydgate no era nada torpe en esas cuestiones.

—¿Qué es lo que te tiene ensimismado? —dijo, inclinándose hacia adelante y acercando su rostro al de su marido.

Lydgate movió las manos y las colocó suavemente en los hombros de Rosamond.

—Estoy pensando en un gran hombre, que tenía aproximadamente la misma edad que yo hace trescientos años y que para entonces había cambiado ya el rumbo de la anatomía.

—No lo adivino —dijo Rosamond, moviendo la cabeza—. Solíamos jugar a adivinar personajes históricos en casa de la señora Lemon, pero no anatomistas.

—Yo te lo diré. Se llamaba Vesalio. Y el único sistema a su alcance, para llegar a saber tanta anatomía como supo, era salir de noche a robar cadáveres de los cementerios y en los sitios donde ejecutaban a los criminales.

—Me alegro mucho de que no seas Vesalio —dijo Rosamond, con un gesto de desagrado en su bonito rostro—. No entiendo por qué no buscó algún método menos horrible.

—Porque no existía —dijo Lydgate, demasiado entusiasmado para hacer mucho caso del comentario de su mujer—. Solo podía conseguir un esqueleto completo robando del patíbulo los huesos blanqueados de un ajusticiado y enterrándolos, para írselos llevando después poco a poco, a escondidas, cuando era noche cerrada.

—Espero que ese Vesalio no sea uno de tus grandes héroes —dijo Rosamond, mitad en broma, mitad preocupada—, porque de lo contrario te veré levantándote por la noche para ir al cementerio de St Peter. Tú mismo me dijiste lo mucho que se enfadó la gente que conocía a la señora Goby, ¿no lo recuerdas? Ya tienes suficientes enemigos.

—También los tuvo Vesalio, Rosy. No hay que sorprenderse de que las antiguallas médicas de Middlemarch estén celosas, cuando algunos de los grandes doctores del momento se opusieron ferozmente a Vesalio porque habían creído en Galeno y él demostró que Galeno estaba equivocado. Lo llamaron embustero y monstruo ponzoñoso. Pero la realidad del esqueleto humano estaba de su parte; de manera que acabó venciendo.

—¿Y qué le sucedió después? —preguntó Rosamond con cierta curiosidad.

—Bueno, tuvo que luchar mucho hasta el final. Y sus enemigos le exasperaron tanto que en una ocasión llegó a quemar buena parte de su obra. Luego naufragó cuando venía de Jerusalén para tomar posesión de una cátedra en Padua. Murió pobre.

Hubo un momento de pausa antes de que Rosamond dijera:

—¿Sabes, Tertius? Creo que muchas veces me gustaría que no fueses médico.

—No, Rosy, no digas eso —exclamó Lydgate, atrayéndola hacia sí—. Eso es como decir que te gustaría haberte casado con otro hombre.

—Nada de eso; tienes inteligencia suficiente para cualquier cosa: podrías haberte dedicado a algo distinto. Y tus primos de Quallingham piensan que has perdido categoría social en relación con ellos por haber elegido la medicina.

—¡Los primos de Quallingham se pueden ir al infierno! —dijo Lydgate con desprecio—. Es muy propio de su desfachatez que te dijeran una cosa así.

—De todas formas —dijo Rosamond—, a mí no me parece una profesión bonita. —Ya sabemos que era capaz de perseverar con mucha calma en sus opiniones.

—Es la profesión más espléndida que hay en el mundo, Rosamond —dijo Lydgate con mucha gravedad —. Y decir que me quieres sin amar al médico que hay en mí, es lo mismo que si dijeras que te gusta comer melocotones pero te molesta su sabor. No vuelvas a decir eso, porque me resulta muy doloroso.

—Está bien, doctor Caraseria —dijo Rosamond, luciendo sus hoyuelos—; de ahora en adelante declararé que me chiflan los esqueletos, los ladrones de cadáveres, los trozos de cosas en tubos de ensayo y las peleas con todo el mundo que terminan en una muerte miserable.

—No, no; no es tan malo, no es así —dijo Lydgate, renunciando a protestar y acariciando a su mujer con resignación.

Capítulo XLVI

Pues no podemos haber aquello que queremos, queramos aquello que podremos.

Refrán español

Mientras Lydgate, finalmente casado y con el hospital bajo su mando, se sentía a gusto luchando contra los habitantes de Middlemarch por la reforma médica, la ciudad misma tomaba cada vez más conciencia de la contienda nacional por otro tipo de reforma.

Para la época en que el proyecto de ley de lord Russell se estaba debatiendo en la Cámara de los Comunes, había una nueva animación política en Middlemarch y una nueva definición de los partidos que podía precipitar un claro cambio de panorama si se convocaban elecciones. Y había quien ya pronosticaba aquel acontecimiento, afirmando que la ley de la reforma electoral nunca saldría adelante si no cambiaba el Parlamento. Eso era lo que Will Ladislaw exponía ante el señor Brooke como una razón para alegrarse de no haber probado su fuerza en las elecciones municipales.

—Las cosas crecerán y madurarán como si se tratara de uno de esos años en los que aparece un cometa —dijo Will—. La actitud del público en general se caldeará muy pronto hasta niveles astronómicos, ahora que la cuestión de la reforma está ya en la palestra. Es muy probable que haya otra elección dentro de poco, y para entonces Middlemarch tendrá más ideas en el cerebro. Lo que debemos hacer ahora es trabajar en el *Pionero* y en los mítines políticos.

—Está usted en lo cierto, Ladislaw; haremos algo nuevo con la opinión pública —dijo el señor Brooke—. Aunque yo me mantendré independiente en el asunto de la reforma, ¿sabe? No deseo ir demasiado lejos. Quiero seguir la línea de Wilberforce y de Romilly, ¿se da cuenta?, y trabajar en la emancipación de los negros, el código criminal, ese tipo de cosas. Pero apoyaré a Grey, por supuesto.

—Si acepta usted el principio de la reforma, tiene que estar preparado para lo que le ofrezca la situación —dijo Will—. Si cada uno se ocupara solo de lo suyo en contra de los demás, se desmoronaría todo el proyecto.

—Sí, sí, estoy de acuerdo con usted: comparto por completo ese punto de vista. Esa será mi manera de exponerlo. Apoyaré a Grey, sí. Pero no deseo cambiar el equilibrio de la constitución, ni creo que Grey lo hiciera.

—Sin embargo, eso es lo que quiere el país —dijo Will—. De lo contrario las uniones políticas[111], o cualquier otro movimiento al tanto de lo que pasa, no tendrían ningún sentido. Se trata de conseguir una Cámara de los Comunes que no esté lastrada con personas propuestas por los terratenientes, sino que cuente con representantes de los demás intereses. Y defender una reforma que quede por debajo de eso es como pedir un poquito de avalancha cuando ya empieza a oírse el fragor de la nieve que cae.

—Eso está muy bien, Ladislaw; así es como debe expresarse. Escríbalo ahora mismo. Tenemos que empezar a recoger documentos sobre la forma de sentir del país, y también de la gente que rompe máquinas y de la zozobra general.

—En cuanto a documentos —dijo Will—, en una tarjeta de cuatro centímetros cabría todo lo necesario. Unas cuantas líneas de cifras bastan para deducir de ellas la miseria y unas pocas más mostrarán que la gente sabe cada vez mejor lo que quiere.

—Muy bien: redacte eso dándole un poco más de extensión, Ladislaw. Esa es una buena idea, ahora que lo pienso: publíquelo en el *Pionero*. Presente las cifras y deduzca la miseria; y presente las otras cifras y

deduzca… y así todo lo demás. Sabe usted muy bien cómo explicar las cosas. Burke, veamos… Cuando pienso en Burke lamento que no haya alguien dispuesto a cederle a usted un distrito municipal, Ladislaw. Porque no conseguirá que lo elijan, compréndalo. Y siempre estaremos necesitados de talento en la Cámara de los Comunes: hagamos las reformas que hagamos, siempre nos hará falta talento. Eso de la avalancha y el fragor, a decir verdad, ha sido un poco del estilo de Burke. Cosas así son las que yo quiero… No se trata de ideas, ya sabe usted, sino de la manera de expresarlas.

—Esos distritos municipales que se pueden ceder a un amigo estarían muy bien —dijo Ladislaw—, si se encontraran siempre en las manos adecuadas y hubiese un Burke disponible.

A Will no le desagradó aquella elogiosa comparación, aunque procediera del señor Brooke; porque resulta exasperante para la condición humana percatarse de que uno se expresa mejor que los demás sin que nadie lo advierta y, ante la general falta de aprecio por las cualidades que lo merecen, incluso un casual rebuzno admirativo en el momento oportuno resulta bastante reconfortante. Will se daba cuenta de que sus refinamientos literarios estaban de ordinario por encima de la capacidad perceptiva de Middlemarch; sin embargo, empezaba a disfrutar mucho con un trabajo del que al principio se había dicho con bastante indiferencia: «¿Por qué no?», y estudiaba la situación política con el mismo apasionado interés con que antes se consagraba a la métrica o al medievalismo. Es indudable que, de no ser por el deseo de estar en el mismo lugar que Dorothea, y quizá también por la ausencia de otras posibilidades, Will no se hallaría en aquel momento meditando sobre las necesidades del pueblo inglés ni criticando a sus estadistas: estaría probablemente en Italia sin rumbo fijo, esbozando argumentos para varios dramas, ensayando la prosa y encontrándola demasiado insípida, probando el verso y hallándolo demasiado artificial, empezando a copiar «trozos» de cuadros antiguos y abandonando la tarea porque los resultados no eran buenos y llegando a la conclusión de que, después de todo, acrecentar la propia cultura era lo más importante; en política, por otra parte, sus simpatías se hubiesen inclinado sin restricciones hacia la libertad y el progreso en general. Nuestro sentido del deber tiene que esperar muchas veces a que surja algún trabajo que ocupe el lugar del diletantismo y nos haga comprender que la calidad de nuestras acciones no nos puede ser indiferente.

Ladislaw había aceptado ya su pizca de trabajo, aunque no fuese aquella cosa indeterminada y excelsa con que había soñado en otro tiempo y que le parecía la única digna de un esfuerzo continuado. Su manera de ser le hacía animarse fácilmente ante temas que estaban claramente mezclados con la vida y con la acción, y la facilidad para rebelarse que existía en él contribuía a reforzar su interés por la cosa pública. A pesar del señor Casaubon y de la prohibición de aparecer por Lowick, era bastante feliz aprendiendo muchas cosas nuevas de primera mano y con una finalidad práctica, y extendiendo la fama del *Pionero* hasta Brassing (no se debe tener en cuenta lo reducido de su zona de influencia; lo que se publicaba en aquel periódico no era peor que gran parte de lo que llega hasta el rincón más apartado del mundo).

El señor Brooke resultaba irritante en ocasiones; pero Will encontraba alivio para sus enfados dividiendo su tiempo entre visitas a Tipton Grange y temporadas en su alojamiento de Middlemarch, que servían para dar mayor variedad a su vida.

«Mueve las fichas sobre el tablero —se decía—, y el señor Brooke podría estar en el Gabinete, y yo sería subsecretario. Ese es el orden normal de las cosas: las olas pequeñas hacen las grandes, y unas y otras responden al mismo esquema. Me encuentro mejor aquí que en el tipo de vida para el que el señor Casaubon hubiera querido formarme, ya que el trabajo estaría todo él ordenado de acuerdo con unos precedentes demasiado rígidos para que yo pudiera reaccionar. No me interesan ni el prestigio ni unos ingresos elevados».

Como Lydgate había dicho de él, Will era una especie de bohemio, que más bien disfrutaba con la sensación de no pertenecer a ninguna clase; se sentía inmerso en una aventura romántica y tenía la agradable convicción de causar cierta sorpresa dondequiera que fuese. Aquel placer se había visto perturbado al advertir una nueva distancia entre Dorothea y él con motivo de su casual encuentro en casa de Lydgate, y su irritación eligió de inmediato como blanco al señor Casaubon, quien había declarado de antemano que Will descendería en la escala social. «Nunca he ocupado un sitio en la escala social», habría replicado Will en el caso de que tal profecía se hubiese hecho en su presencia, y la sangre habría aparecido y desaparecido de su piel transparente a la velocidad con que el aire entra y sale de los pulmones. Pero una cosa es el placer de lanzar un desafío y otra muy distinta que nos gusten sus consecuencias.

Mientras tanto, la opinión de la ciudad sobre el nuevo director del *Pionero* tendía a confirmar el punto de vista del señor Casaubon. El parentesco de Will con aquella distinguida familia no le había servido, como en el caso de Lydgate, de ventajosa introducción: aunque se rumoreaba que el joven Ladislaw era primo o sobrino del señor Casaubon, también se decía que «el señor Casaubon no quería saber nada de él».

—Brooke lo ha recogido —decía el señor Hawley—, porque ningún hombre en su sano juicio lo hubiese

hecho. Casaubon tiene buenísimas razones, pueden estar seguros, para volver la espalda a un joven cuya educación ha costeado. Muy típico de Brooke, que es una de esas personas que siempre salen por donde menos se espera.

Y algunas rarezas de Will, más o menos poéticas, parecían dar la razón al señor Keck, director de la *Trompeta*, al afirmar que Ladislaw, si la verdad llegara a saberse, no solo resultaría ser un espía polaco, sino estar loco de remate por añadidura, lo que explicaría la increíble rapidez y soltura con que hablaba cuando se subía a un estrado, cosa que hacía siempre que se le presentaba la ocasión, discurseando con una facilidad que contrastaba con la característica flema inglesa. A Keck le resultaba repugnante ver a un jovencito, de rubios y rizados cabellos, ponerse en pie y criticar durante horas instituciones «que ya existían cuando él estaba en la cuna». Y en un editorial de la *Trompeta*, Keck caracterizaba el discurso de Ladislaw en un mitin en favor de la reforma, como resultado de «la violencia de un energúmeno, un esfuerzo miserable para arropar con brillantez de fuegos artificiales la audacia de afirmaciones irresponsables y la pobreza de unos conocimientos tan vulgares como improvisados».

—Muy vigoroso su artículo de ayer, Keck —le dijo el doctor Sprague con intención sarcástica—. Pero ¿qué es un energúmeno?

—Un término que apareció durante la Revolución francesa —dijo Keck.

Aquel peligroso aspecto de Ladislaw contrastaba extrañamente con otras costumbres suyas que se convirtieron en tema de comentarios. Will sentía una inclinación, mitad artística, mitad afectuosa, por los niños: cuanto más pequeños fueran, siempre que supieran andar, y más pintoresca la ropa que llevasen, más le gustaba sorprenderlos y agradarles. Sabemos que en Roma tendía a callejear por los barrios humildes, y aquel gusto no lo abandonó en Middlemarch.

De alguna manera había conseguido reunir a un grupo de niños pintorescos, muchachitos destocados con pantalones anchos y muy raídos, y escasa tela de camisa con que cubrirse, niñas que tenían que sacarse el pelo de los ojos para mirarlo, y otros niños que ya eran guardianes de sus hermanos más pequeños a la madura edad de siete años. Will había llevado a esta tropa de excursión a Halsell Wood durante la época de las nueces y las avellanas, y tras la llegada del tiempo frío los había congregado en un día despejado para reunir ramas con que hacer una fogata en una hondonada junto a la ladera de una colina, organizando para ellos un pequeño festín con pan de jengibre e improvisando un teatro de títeres con algunas marionetas de fabricación casera. Aquella era una de sus rarezas. Otra, que en las casas donde era bien recibido, tenía tendencia a tumbarse sobre la alfombra mientras hablaba, por lo que era muy posible que lo descubrieran en aquella actitud visitantes ocasionales para quienes semejante irregularidad confirmaba las ideas sobre la peligrosa mezcla de sangres que corría por sus venas y su habitual indiferencia por las normas sociales.

Por otra parte, los artículos y los discursos de Will lo recomendaban, como es lógico, a las familias a quienes el nuevo rigor de la división en partidos había colocado del lado de la reforma. Se le invitaba por ejemplo a casa del señor Bulstrode, pero allí no podía tumbarse en la alfombra, y la señora Bulstrode consideraba que su manera de hablar de los países católicos como si existiera una tregua con el Anticristo ilustraba la habitual tendencia al error de los intelectuales.

En casa del señor Farebrother, sin embargo, a quien la ironía de los acontecimientos había colocado en el mismo bando que a Bulstrode en cuestiones de política nacional, Will se convirtió en favorito de las damas; especialmente de la diminuta señorita Noble, y una de sus rarezas consistía en acompañarla cuando se la encontraba por la calle con su cestita, ofreciéndole el brazo a la vista de toda la ciudad, e insistiendo en ir con ella a hacer algunas de las visitas en las que distribuía los pequeños hurtos de su ración de cosas dulces.

La casa que Will visitaba con más frecuencia y donde más se tumbaba sobre la alfombra era la de Lydgate. Los dos hombres no se parecían en nada, si bien ello no impedía que estuvieran de acuerdo. Lydgate era brusco pero no irritable, y hacía muy poco caso de las excentricidades en personas con buena salud; Ladislaw, por su parte, no solía malgastar sus rarezas con quienes hacían caso omiso de ellas. Con Rosamond, por otro lado, se enfurruñaba y se mostraba caprichoso, incluso descortés con frecuencia, con gran sorpresa por parte de ella, aunque no lo dejara traslucir; de todas formas se iba haciendo cada vez más necesario para los ratos de esparcimiento de la señora Lydgate, porque la acompañaba cuando tocaba el piano, por su amena conversación y por estar libre de las graves preocupaciones que, a pesar de toda la ternura y generosidad de su marido, hacían a menudo que los modales de este dejaran que desear y que confirmaban su antipatía por la profesión médica.

Lydgate, inclinado a mostrarse sarcástico sobre la fe supersticiosa de la gente en la eficacia de la futura ley de la reforma electoral, mientras nadie se preocupaba del deficiente estado de la patología, atacaba a veces a Will con preguntas molestas. Una velada de marzo, Rosamond, con su vestido de color cereza con

adornos de fustán alrededor del cuello, estaba sentada a la mesa del té; Lydgate, que acababa de llegar fatigado después de hacer visitas a domicilio, estaba junto al fuego con una pierna por encima del brazo del sillón y una sombra de preocupación en la frente mientras sus ojos recorrían las columnas del *Pionero*; Rosamond, que se había dado cuenta de su estado de ánimo, evitaba mirarlo, dando gracias al cielo en su interior por no tener un temperamento inclinado a la melancolía. Will Ladislaw, tumbado en la alfombra, contemplaba ensimismado la barra de la cortina y tarareaba en voz muy baja las notas de *La primera vez que vi tu rostro*, mientras el perro de aguas de la casa, también tumbado, aunque con muy pocas posibilidades de elegir sitio, miraba en silencio al usurpador de la alfombra por entre las patas delanteras, con expresión decididamente recriminatoria.

Al presentarle Rosamond la taza de té, Lydgate arrojó el periódico y dijo, dirigiéndose a Will, que se había levantado para acercarse a la mesa:

—No sirve de nada que presente usted a Brooke como terrateniente reformador: con eso solo consigue que la *Trompeta* le encuentre cada día nuevos defectos.

—No importa; los que leen el *Pionero* no leen la *Trompeta* —dijo Will, tomando el té y paseando de un lado para otro—. ¿Acaso supone usted que la gente lee la prensa con intención de convertirse? En ese caso tendríamos un bebedizo terriblemente fuerte… «Mezcla, mezcla, tú que mezclar podrás…»[112] y nadie sabría ya qué postura tomar.

—Farebrother no cree que elijan a Brooke si llega a presentarse la oportunidad: los mismos que afirman ahora estar a su favor sacarían del saco a otro candidato en el momento oportuno.

—No hacemos daño a nadie intentándolo. Es bueno contar con parlamentarios residentes.

—¿Por qué? —dijo Lydgate, que tenía mucha costumbre de utilizar esas dos palabras tan inconvenientes con un tono muy brusco.

—Representan mejor a la estupidez local —dijo Will riendo y agitando sus rizos—; y se consigue que se porten lo mejor posible por vivir en los alrededores. Brooke no es mala persona, y ha hecho algunas cosas buenas en sus propiedades sin otra razón que las esperanzas parlamentarias.

—No sirve para hombre público —dijo Lydgate con desdeñosa firmeza—. Decepcionaría a todos los que contaran con él: lo veo en el hospital. Solo que allí es Bulstrode el que lleva las riendas y lo dirige.

—Eso depende de con qué criterio se fije el nivel para los hombres públicos —dijo Will—. Brooke es lo bastante bueno para esta ocasión: cuando la gente se ha decidido por una postura como lo está haciendo ahora, no necesita a un hombre… solo quiere un voto.

—Ese es el método que siguen ustedes los escritores políticos: alaban una medida como si fuera una panacea universal y elogian a hombres que son parte de la misma enfermedad que precisa ser curada.

—¿Por qué no? Algunas personas pueden contribuir a borrarse de la faz del país sin darse cuenta —dijo Will, que podía improvisar razones cuando no había previsto una pregunta.

—Eso no es excusa para exagerar las esperanzas en una medida particular, colaborando a que todo el mundo comulgue con ruedas de molino y envíe a la Cámara de los Comunes a papagayos con derecho a voto que solo sirven para lograr que se apruebe la ley. Usted está en contra de la corrupción, pero no hay nada más corrupto que hacer creer a la gente que es posible curar a la sociedad con un abracadabra político.

—Eso está muy bien, mi querido amigo. Pero la cura tiene que empezar en algún sitio y parta usted de la base de que mil cosas que degradan a un pueblo nunca podrán cambiar si no se empieza por esta reforma concreta. Fíjese en lo que dijo Stanley[113] el otro día, que la Cámara lleva suficiente tiempo ocupándose de insignificantes asuntos de soborno, investigando si este o aquel votante han recibido una guinea, cuando todo el mundo sabe que los escaños se venden al por mayor. Esperar a que los representantes públicos sean prudentes y tengan conciencia es una tontería. La única conciencia de la que nos podemos fiar es el sentimiento masivo de injusticia de una clase y la prudencia más eficaz es la de equilibrar exigencias distintas. Por esas normas me guío… ¿Qué lado se ve perjudicado? Yo apoyo al hombre que defiende las exigencias de los más débiles, no al individuo virtuoso que respalda lo que está mal.

—Esas consideraciones generales sobre un caso particular son una manera de dar por sentado lo que hace falta probar, Ladislaw. Cuando digo que apruebo la dosis que cura, no se sigue de ahí que dé mi aprobación para recurrir al opio en un determinado caso de gota.

—No estoy dando por sentado lo que hace falta probar: se trata de saber si debemos o no quedarnos quietos hasta que encontremos hombres inmaculados con los que trabajar. ¿Es ese el plan que elegiría usted? Si hubiese un hombre que sacara adelante una reforma médica y otro que se opusiera, ¿se pararía usted a preguntar quién tiene los mejores motivos o incluso la mejor cabeza?

—Claro que no —dijo Lydgate, viéndose vencido por un razonamiento que él mismo había usado con

frecuencia—, si uno no trabajara con los hombres que tiene a su alcance, las cosas llegarían a un punto muerto. Supongamos que las peores sospechas que existen en Middlemarch sobre Bulstrode se confirmaran: eso no invalidaría el hecho de que tiene el sentido común y la suficiente decisión para hacer lo que yo creo que debe hacerse en los asuntos que conozco y que más me interesan; pero ese es el único terreno por el que avanzo con él —añadió Lydgate con bastante autocomplacencia, recordando las advertencias del señor Farebrother—. Bulstrode no significa nada para mí en ningún otro aspecto. No lo elogiaría por ningún motivo personal… Me guardaría mucho de hacerlo.

—¿Quiere usted decir que yo elogio a Brooke por motivos personales? —dijo Will Ladislaw, irritado y volviéndose bruscamente. Por vez primera le habían ofendido las palabras de Lydgate; especialmente, quizá, porque hubiese rechazado cualquier escrutinio detenido de la historia de sus relaciones con el señor Brooke.

—En absoluto —dijo Lydgate—; estaba tan solo explicando mis propias acciones. Quería decir que un hombre puede trabajar con vistas a un fin concreto junto a otras personas cuyos motivos y trayectoria general sean dudosos, si está completamente seguro de su independencia personal y colabora sin que entren en juego sus intereses personales… tanto de posición como de dinero.

—En ese caso, ¿por qué no extiende esa liberalidad a los demás? —dijo Will, todavía irritado—. Mi independencia personal me resulta tan importante como a usted la suya. No tiene más razones para suponer que yo espero algo personal de Brooke, de las que yo tengo para imaginar que espera usted algún beneficio material de Bulstrode. Los motivos son puntos de honor, supongo; nadie puede probarlos. En cuanto a dinero y posición en el mundo —terminó Will, echando hacia atrás la cabeza—, creo que está bastante claro que no me mueven consideraciones de esa especie.

—Me interpreta usted mal, Ladislaw —dijo Lydgate, sorprendido. Había estado tan preocupado con su propia defensa que no había previsto las implicaciones personales que Will podía descubrir en sus palabras —. Le pido perdón por haberle molestado sin intención alguna de hacerlo. De hecho, siempre le atribuiría a usted una romántica indiferencia ante sus propios intereses mundanos. En la cuestión política me refería tan solo a prejuicios intelectuales.

—¡Qué desagradables están ustedes dos esta noche! —dijo Rosamond—. No concibo por qué ha sido necesario sacar a relucir el dinero. La política y la medicina son ya temas de discusión bien molestos, y los dos podrían seguir peleándose indefinidamente entre sí y con todo el mundo.

Rosamond parecía mansamente neutral mientras hablaba, alzándose para tocar la campanilla y dirigiéndose después a su mesa de trabajo.

—¡Pobre Rosy! —dijo Lydgate, extendiendo una mano hacia ella cuando pasaba por delante—. Los debates no resultan divertidos para los querubines. Oigamos un poco de música. Pídele a Ladislaw que cante contigo.

Cuando Will se hubo marchado, Rosamond dijo a su marido:

—¿Qué es lo que te ha puesto hoy de mal humor, Tertius?

—¿A mí? Era Ladislaw el que estaba de mal humor. Es como un trozo de yesca.

—Estoy hablando de antes. Algo te ha molestado antes de llegar a casa; te lo he notado al entrar. Y eso es lo que ha hecho que empezaras a pelearte con Ladislaw. Me haces sufrir mucho cuando te veo así, Tertius.

—¿De veras? Entonces soy un animal —dijo Lydgate, acariciándola con gesto arrepentido.

—¿Qué era lo que te preocupaba?

—Cosas de fuera de casa… asuntos míos.

En realidad se trataba de una carta que insistía en el pago de una factura por la compra de muebles. Pero Rosamond estaba esperando un hijo y Lydgate quería evitarle cualquier motivo de inquietud.

Capítulo XLVII

Nunca amor verdadero amó en vano,
porque el amor verdadero es la más alta recompensa.
Ningún artificio puede crearlo: ha de brotar
donde se formen sus elementos.
Así en la hora y el lugar que el cielo quiere
brota la florecilla natural,
raíz descendente y cáliz hacia las alturas,
modelada por la tierra y el cielo.

Fue un sábado por la tarde cuando Will Ladislaw discutió con Lydgate. El efecto de aquella insignificante pelea fue que al regresar a su alojamiento siguiera levantado la mitad de la noche, considerando de nuevo, con irritación renovada, todo lo que ya había pensado anteriormente sobre su decisión de instalarse en Middlemarch y ponerse al servicio del señor Brooke. Sus vacilaciones antes de dar aquel paso se habían convertido desde entonces en susceptibilidad ante cualquier insinuación de que hubiese sido más prudente no hacerlo; y de ahí surgía su acaloramiento con Lydgate, acaloramiento que aún lo tenía intranquilo. ¿No estaba cometiendo una estupidez… y en un momento en que era más consciente que nunca de ser algo mejor que un estúpido? ¿Y con qué fin?

En realidad, sin fin determinado. Era cierto que tenía ensoñaciones de posibilidades: no hay ser humano que, dotado de pasiones y de ideas, no piense en las consecuencias de sus pasiones; que no encuentre imágenes que se alcen en su mente y calmen su pasión con esperanzas o la aflijan con temores. Esto, que nos sucede a todos, presenta amplias diferencias según las personas, y Will no era uno de los que tienen una sensatez que los lleva siempre «por el camino recto»; tenía sus desvíos donde hallaba pequeñas alegrías de su propia elección, alegrías que caballeros que galopasen por el camino recto habrían considerado más bien descabelladas. La manera en que transformaba en felicidad sus sentimientos hacia Dorothea era un ejemplo de aquello. Quizá parezca extraño, pero lo cierto es que las posibilidades ordinarias y vulgares que las sospechas de Casaubon le atribuían —que la viudez de Dorothea y la amistad surgida entre ellos la llevase a aceptarlo por marido—, no le tentaban ni tenían poder para cautivarlo; Will no vivía en la situación creada por ese acontecimiento, llevándolo hasta sus últimas consecuencias, como hacemos todos con ese «mundo distinto» imaginario que es nuestro paraíso de aquí y de ahora. No era tan solo que fuese reacio a cultivar pensamientos que pudieran servir para acusarlo de bajeza, agobiado como se encontraba ya por la intranquilidad de tener que justificarse ante la acusación de ingratitud, sino que la conciencia latente de las muchas barreras entre Dorothea y él, aparte de la existencia de su marido, le habían ayudado a apartar de su imaginación cualquier cálculo sobre lo que pudiera sucederle al señor Casaubon. Y aún había otras razones. Will, como sabemos, no soportaba la idea de que apareciese el menor defecto en su cristal: le exasperaba y le encantaba al mismo tiempo la tranquila espontaneidad con que Dorothea lo miraba y hablaba con él, y había algo tan exquisito en pensar en ella tal como era que no podía anhelar ningún cambio que contribuyera a hacerla distinta. ¿No rehuimos la versión callejera de una hermosa melodía? ¿No lamentamos la noticia de que el objeto precioso —una pequeña escultura o quizá un grabado—, que nos hace recordar con alegría incluso las dificultades que nos ha costado vislumbrarlo durante unos instantes, no es en realidad una cosa muy poco corriente y puede obtenerse como cualquier posesión cotidiana? Nuestra felicidad depende de la calidad y amplitud de nuestra emoción; y para Will, una criatura a quien importaban muy poco eso que llamamos las realidades tangibles de la vida, pero sí mucho en

cambio sus influencias más sutiles, disfrutar de un sentimiento como el que Dorothea le inspiraba era como heredar una fortuna. Lo que otros quizá hubiesen llamado la futilidad de su pasión suponía un gozo adicional para su espíritu: era consciente de una actividad generosa y de que estaba haciendo verdad con su propia experiencia el amor poesía que había cautivado su imaginación. Dorothea, se decía Will, estaba para siempre entronizada en su alma; era imposible que otra mujer se situara por encima de su pedestal; y él podría haber escrito en sílabas inmortales el efecto que Dorothea producía en su interior, y haberse jactado, siguiendo el ejemplo del viejo Drayton, de que

Las reinas podrán en el futuro alegrarse de vivir
con la limosna de las alabanzas que le sobren.

Aquel resultado, sin embargo, era dudoso. ¿Y qué otra cosa podía hacer él por Dorothea? ¿De qué le servía su devoción? Era imposible saberlo. No se alejaría de ella. Will no veía entre amigos y parientes a nadie a quien le pareciera que Dorothea hablaba con la sencilla confianza con que lo hacía con él. Una vez había dicho que le gustaría que se quedara; y eso es lo que haría, por mucho que lanzaran fuego por la boca los dragones que tenía a su alrededor.

Tal había sido siempre la conclusión de sus vacilaciones. Will no se hallaba libre del espíritu de contradicción ni de rebelarse incluso contra su propia resolución. Con frecuencia le había irritado, como le sucedía aquella noche, alguna confirmación exterior de que sus labores públicas con el señor Brooke podían no parecer tan heroicas como a él le gustaría, y aquello iba siempre asociado con otro motivo de irritación: que, a pesar del sacrificio de su dignidad por amor a Dorothea, apenas lograba verla alguna vez. Después de lo cual, al no ser capaz de invalidar hechos tan desagradables, Will contradecía sus más fuertes inclinaciones y decía: «Soy un estúpido».

Sin embargo, puesto que el debate interior giraba necesariamente en torno a Dorothea, Will terminó, como ya le había sucedido antes, con una conciencia más viva de lo que su presencia significaría para él; y de pronto, al reflexionar que al día siguiente era domingo, decidió ir a la iglesia de Lowick y verla. Se durmió con aquella idea, pero cuando se estaba vistiendo a la luz racional de la mañana, la Objeción dijo:

—Eso sería prácticamente un desafío a la prohibición del señor Casaubon, y Dorothea se disgustará.

—¡Tonterías! —argumentó la Inclinación—, sería demasiado monstruoso que se me impidiera ir a una bonita iglesia rural una mañana de primavera. Y Dorothea se alegrará.

—Para el señor Casaubon estará muy claro que has ido allí para molestarlo o para ver a Dorothea.

—No es cierto que vaya para molestarlo, y ¿por qué no he de ver a Dorothea? ¿Es que él ha de tenerlo todo y vivir eternamente sin problemas? Que sufra un poco, como otras personas. Siempre me ha gustado el pintoresquismo de la iglesia y de los feligreses; además, conozco a los Tucker: me sentaré en su banco.

Después de haber silenciado a la Objeción con la fuerza de la sinrazón, Will se dirigió andando hacia Lowick como si se encaminara hacia el paraíso, cruzando Halsell Common y siguiendo la linde del bosque, donde la luz del sol atravesaba libremente las ramas de los árboles aún sin florecer, revelando la belleza de musgos y líquenes y mostrando nuevos retoños verdes que empezaban a abrirse camino entre el color pardo. Todas las cosas parecían saber que era domingo y aprobar su visita a la iglesia de Lowick. Will se sentía dichoso con facilidad cuando nada contrariaba su optimismo, y para entonces la idea de molestar al señor Casaubon le resultaba más bien divertida, y gracias a ella asomaba en su rostro una alegre sonrisa, tan agradable de ver como la aparición de la luz del sol sobre el agua, aunque el motivo nada tuviese de ejemplar. Reconozcamos, sin embargo, que casi todos estamos dispuestos a decidir en nuestro interior que el hombre que nos cierra el camino es odioso, y que no nos importa causarle un poco de la repugnancia que su persona despierta en nosotros. Will fue paseando con un librito bajo el brazo y las manos en los bolsillos, sin leer en ningún momento y canturreando un poco, mientras se imaginaba lo que podría pasar dentro de la iglesia y al salir de ella. Hacía experimentos con melodías que sirvieran para unos versos suyos, unas veces ensayando con una pieza ya existente, otras improvisando. No se trataba exactamente de un himno, pero las palabras eran sin duda adecuadas para su experiencia dominical:

¡Dios mío, de qué alegrías tan frugales
se alimenta mi amor!
Una sensación, un rayo que no está aquí,
una sombra que ya se ha ido:

el recuerdo de un aliento que quizá esté cerca,

el eco interior de un tono de voz,
la posibilidad de que alguien piense en mí con cariño,
el sitio del primer encuentro,

el temblor de un miedo proscrito,
un mal que no se hizo…
¡Dios mío, de qué alegrías tan frugales
se alimenta el amor!

A veces, cuando se quitaba el sombrero, echando la cabeza hacia atrás y mostrando al cantar la delicada garganta, parecía como una encarnación de la primavera que llenaba la atmósfera con su espíritu: una criatura esplendorosa, rebosante de promesas inciertas.

Las campanas repicaban aún cuando llegó a Lowick, y se colocó en el banco del vicario antes de que llegase ninguna otra persona. Aún seguía solo en él cuando ya estaban congregados todos los fieles. El banco del vicario se hallaba frente al del rector a la entrada del pequeño presbiterio, y Will dispuso de tiempo suficiente para temer que Dorothea no apareciera mientras miraba a su alrededor y examinaba el grupo de rostros rurales que año tras año se sentaban en los viejos y oscuros bancos, entre las paredes encaladas, apenas con más cambios de los que advertimos en las ramas de un árbol que se quiebra aquí y allí por la edad, sin dejar por ello de producir nuevos brotes. El rostro de rana del señor Rigg era una cosa extraña e inexplicable pero, a pesar de aquella conmoción en el orden de las cosas, allí seguían aún los Waule y la rama rural de los Powderell en sus bancos, uno junto a otro; la mejilla del hermano Solomon tenía el mismo redondel morado de siempre y las tres generaciones de honrados granjeros acudían como en tiempos pasados con un difuso sentimiento de obligación hacia las personas de rango superior; los niños más pequeños consideraban al señor Casaubon, que vestía la ropa talar negra y ocupaba el sitio más elevado, como jefe de todas aquellas personas importantes, y capaz de mostrarse más terrible que ningún otro si se le ofendía. Incluso en 1831 Lowick vivía en paz, tan escasamente agitado por la reforma electoral como por el carácter solemne del sermón dominical. Todos los feligreses se habían acostumbrado en días pretéritos a ver a Will en la iglesia y nadie reparó mucho en él, con la excepción del maestro del coro, quien supuso que Ladislaw haría un buen papel a la hora de cantar los himnos.

Dorothea apareció por fin en aquel pintoresco escenario, avanzando por el breve pasillo con su sombrero blanco de castor y su capa gris: los mismos que llevaba durante la visita al Vaticano. Como desde el momento de entrar su rostro estaba orientado hacia el presbiterio, a pesar de su cortedad de vista reconoció muy pronto a Will, pero no hubo más signo exterior de sus sentimientos que una ligera palidez y una grave inclinación de cabeza al llegar a su altura. Para su propia sorpresa, Will se sintió repentinamente incómodo y no se atrevió a mirarla después de devolverle el saludo. Dos minutos después, cuando el señor Casaubon salió de la sacristía y, al entrar en el banco, se sentó frente a Dorothea, Will notó que su parálisis era aún más completa. Solo podía mirar al maestro del coro situado en el pequeño balcón sobre la puerta de la sacristía: Dorothea estaba quizá dolida y él había cometido un lastimoso error. Ya no era divertido molestar al señor Casaubon, que tenía la ventaja, probablemente, de estar vigilándolo y de advertir que no se atrevía a volver la cabeza. ¿Por qué no había pensado antes en todo aquello? Si bien no podía prever que tuviera que sentarse solo en aquel banco, sin la presencia de ninguno de los Tucker, que, al parecer, se habían marchado definitivamente de Lowick, porque el clérigo que se hallaba ante el atril era un desconocido. De todas formas Will se llamó estúpido por no haber previsto que le sería imposible mirar hacia Dorothea: más aún, que ella podía considerar su aparición una impertinencia. No había forma, sin embargo, de librarse de aquella jaula; y Will encontró los pasajes en el texto y mantuvo la mirada en las páginas del libro como lo hubiera hecho una maestra, convencido de que el servicio matutino nunca había sido tan desmesuradamente largo, y de que él resultaba completamente ridículo, estaba de mal humor y se sentía muy desdichado. ¡Aquello era lo que conseguía un hombre por idolatrar hasta la sombra de una mujer! El maestro del coro observó con sorpresa que el señor Ladislaw no se unía al himno de Hannover, y supuso que estaría resfriado.

El señor Casaubon no predicó aquella mañana y la situación de Will no se modificó hasta que se dio la bendición y todo el mundo se puso en pie. En Lowick la costumbre era que las «personas importantes» salieran primero. Repentinamente, decidido a romper la parálisis que le dominaba, Will miró directamente al señor Casaubon pero los ojos de su primo estaban fijos en el tirador de la puertecita de acceso al banco, que procedió a abrir, dejando salir a Dorothea y siguiéndola inmediatamente sin levantar la vista. Los ojos de Will habían coincidido con los de Dorothea al abandonar ella el banco, y de nuevo la señora Casaubon le

saludó con una inclinación de cabeza, pero esta vez con gesto alterado, como si estuviera conteniendo las lágrimas. Will los siguió, pero ellos continuaron en dirección al pequeño portón que comunicaba el patio de la iglesia con el huerto de Lowick Manor, sin volver nunca la vista atrás.

A Will no le era posible seguirlos y tuvo que regresar tristemente a Middlemarch por el mismo camino que había recorrido con tantas esperanzas por la mañana. Las luces y las sombras habían cambiado por completo, tanto fuera como dentro de él.

Capítulo XLVIII

Sin duda las horas doradas se vuelven grises,
no bailan ya, y se esfuerzan en vano por correr:
veo sus cabellos blancos flotando al viento…
Todos los rostros están demacrados cuando me miran,
mientras giran despacio en la esfera constante que los abraza
empujados por la tormenta.

La congoja de Dorothea al abandonar la iglesia se debía fundamentalmente a haber advertido que el señor Casaubon estaba decidido a no hablar con su primo y que la aparición de Will en el templo solo había servido para señalar con más fuerza la distancia que los separaba. La iniciativa de Will le pareció excusable, más aún, la consideró un encomiable intento en pos de la reconciliación que ella anhelaba desde el primer momento. Ladislaw se había imaginado probablemente, igual que ella, que, si el señor Casaubon y él se encontraban de una manera natural, se darían la mano y quizá reanudaran unas relaciones amistosas. Ahora Dorothea se sentía despojada de aquella esperanza. Will quedaba más proscrito que nunca, ya que el señor Casaubon debía sentirse doblemente contrariado por el hecho de que se le impusiera una presencia que él se negaba a reconocer.

El señor Casaubon no se había encontrado muy bien por la mañana, aquejado de ciertas dificultades de respiración, y esa era la causa de que no hubiese predicado; a Dorothea no le sorprendió, por tanto, que casi no hablara durante el almuerzo, y todavía menos que no hiciese la menor alusión a Will Ladislaw. Por su parte, se daba cuenta de que ella nunca volvería a mencionarlo. Los domingos, de ordinario, el señor y la señora Casaubon pasaban separados las horas entre el almuerzo y la cena; el señor Casaubon se recluía en la biblioteca, dormitando casi todo el tiempo, y Dorothea en su *boudoir*, donde solía leer alguno de sus libros favoritos, que formaban un montoncito sobre la mesa junto al mirador: libros de distintas clases, desde Herodoto, que estaba aprendiendo a leer con la ayuda del señor Casaubon, hasta su compañero desde hacía años, Pascal, y también el *Año cristiano*[114]. Hoy los abría uno tras otro y no era capaz de interesarse por ninguno. Todo le resultaba monótono: los prodigios antes del nacimiento de Ciro… las antigüedades judías… ¡Dios mío!… los epigramas devotos… la sagrada armonía de sus himnos preferidos… todos tan insípidos como melodías aporreadas sobre madera: hasta las flores primaverales y la hierba se estremecían débilmente bajo las nubes de la tarde que de vez en cuando ocultaban el sol; incluso los pensamientos consoladores ya convertidos en hábito parecían encerrar en su interior el cansancio de largos días futuros en los que seguiría viviendo con ellos como únicos compañeros. Era otra cosa, o más bien una especie más intensa de compañía lo que ella necesitaba, y aquella necesidad había ido creciendo debido al esfuerzo constante que le exigía su vida de casada. Dorothea siempre estaba tratando de ser lo que su marido quería que fuese, pero nunca lograba comprobar que al señor Casaubon le satisficiera lo que ya era. Las cosas que a ella le gustaban, las que espontáneamente le apetecía tener, quedaban siempre excluidas de su vida; porque, si se trataba de algo concedido pero no compartido con el señor Casaubon, el resultado era el mismo que si se le hubiera negado. Acerca de Will Ladislaw había existido desacuerdo entre ellos desde el primer momento, y la reflexión sobre aquel desacuerdo, desde que el señor Casaubon rechazó con tanta severidad los vivos sentimientos de Dorothea sobre los derechos de su primo a las propiedades familiares, había terminado convenciéndola de que ella estaba en lo cierto y de que su marido se equivocaba, pero que estaba atada de manos. Aquella tarde la impotencia le resultaba más dolorosamente paralizante que nunca:

Dorothea anhelaba contar con personas sobre quienes volcar su afecto y que respondieran a aquel afecto suyo. Anhelaba una tarea que fuese directamente benéfica como el sol y la lluvia y, en cambio, parecía que iba a vivir cada vez más en algo que se asemejaba mucho a una tumba, rodeada de los instrumentos de una tarea espectral cuyos resultados nunca llegarían a ver la luz. Dorothea había estado aquel día en la puerta de la tumba y había visto a Will Ladislaw alejándose en dirección a un mundo de cálida actividad y de confraternización… volviendo el rostro hacia ella mientras caminaba.

Los libros carecían de utilidad. Pensar, también. Era domingo y no disponía del coche para ir a ver a Celia, que acababa de tener un hijo. No existía refugio contra el vacío espiritual y el descontento, y Dorothea tuvo que soportar el mal humor como hubiese soportado una jaqueca.

Después de cenar, a la hora en que habitualmente empezaba a leer en voz alta, el señor Casaubon propuso que fueran a la biblioteca, donde, dijo, había encargado ya que encendieran el fuego y llevaran luces. Parecía reanimado y activamente ocupado en sus pensamientos.

Ya en la biblioteca, Dorothea observó que su marido había reordenado sobre la mesa una hilera de cuadernos. En seguida el señor Casaubon le hizo entrega de una libreta que ella conocía perfectamente y que contenía un índice de todos los demás cuadernos.

—Te quedaré muy agradecido, querida —dijo él, tomando asiento—, si, en lugar de leer hoy cualquier otra cosa, repites en voz alta el contenido de esa libreta con un lápiz en la mano, y cada vez que yo diga «marca», haces una cruz. Se trata del primer paso de un proceso de selección que vengo considerando desde hace tiempo, y a medida que avancemos estaré en condiciones de indicarte ciertos principios mediante los cuales confío en que participarás de una manera inteligente en lo que me propongo hacer.

Aquel ofrecimiento era tan solo un signo más, añadido a otros muchos, desde la memorable entrevista con Lydgate, de que la primitiva repugnancia del señor Casaubon a permitir que Dorothea trabajara con él había dado paso a la tendencia contraria, es decir, a pedirle que se interesara por su tarea y colaborase activamente en ella.

Después de pasar dos horas leyendo y marcando, el señor Casaubon dijo:

—Vamos a llevar el cuaderno al dormitorio, y el lápiz también, si no te importa, y, en el caso de que queramos leer por la noche, proseguiremos esta tarea. Confío en que no te resulte demasiado fatigosa.

—Siempre prefiero leer lo que a ti más te apetezca —dijo Dorothea, expresando una verdad muy simple; porque lo que más temía era afanarse en leer o en cualquier otra cosa que dejara a su marido tan triste como siempre.

Una prueba de la fuerza con que ciertas características de Dorothea impresionaban a las personas que la conocían era que su marido, a pesar de todos sus celos y sospechas, había ido acumulando una confianza implícita en la integridad de sus promesas y en su capacidad para consagrarse a su idea personal de lo justo y de lo mejor. En los últimos tiempos el señor Casaubon había empezado a pensar que aquellas cualidades le pertenecían especialmente, y quería monopolizarlas.

Hubo ocasión de leer durante la noche. Dorothea, con su cansancio juvenil, se sumió pronto en un sueño profundo, pero la despertó una sensación de luz que al principio se le antojó una repentina visión de una puesta de sol después de haber trepado por una colina muy escarpada: al abrir los ojos vio a su marido envuelto en una bata muy abrigada sentado en el sillón cercano a la chimenea, donde aún brillaban los rescoldos del fuego. Había encendido dos velas, confiando en que Dorothea se despertase, pero sin querer utilizar medios más directos.

—¿Te encuentras mal, Edward? —dijo ella, levantándose al instante.

—Siento cierto desasosiego cuando estoy tumbado. Me quedaré un rato aquí.

Dorothea echó leña al fuego, se cubrió con una bata y preguntó:

—¿Quieres que te lea?

—Te quedaré muy agradecido si lo haces, Dorothea —respondió el señor Casaubon, con un poco más de humildad de la habitual en sus modales siempre corteses—. Estoy completamente despierto y con una gran lucidez mental.

—Temo que sea demasiada agitación para ti —dijo Dorothea, recordando las advertencias de Lydgate.

—No; no me parece que esté especialmente agitado. Pensar me resulta fácil.

Dorothea no se atrevió a insistir y estuvo leyendo por espacio de una hora o más, siguiendo el mismo plan utilizado después de la cena, pero avanzando con mayor rapidez. El intelecto del señor Casaubon estaba más activo y le bastaba una sola palabra para recordar lo que venía a continuación, diciendo: «eso es suficiente… márcalo», o: «pasa al apartado siguiente… omito el segundo apéndice sobre Creta». Dorothea estaba asombrada ante la extraordinaria velocidad con que su marido sobrevolaba el terreno por el que había estado arrastrándose durante años. Finalmente, el señor Casaubon dijo:

—Ahora cierra el cuaderno. Mañana seguiremos trabajando. Lo he retrasado mucho tiempo y me gustaría verlo terminado. Ya has comprendido que el principio utilizado para llevar a cabo la selección consiste en dar ilustración adecuada, pero no desproporcionada, a cada una de las tesis enumeradas en la introducción, tal como se encuentra esbozada en el momento presente. Eso lo has notado con toda claridad, ¿no es cierto, Dorothea?

—Sí —respondió ella con voz más bien trémula. Se sentía llena de angustia.

—Y ahora creo que podré descansar un poco —dijo el señor Casaubon. Luego procedió a acostarse y pidió a Dorothea que apagara las luces. Cuando también ella se hubo acostado y reinó otra vez la oscuridad, mitigada tan solo por el mortecino resplandor de los rescoldos en la chimenea, el señor Casaubon habló nuevamente:

—Antes de dormirme, tengo que hacerte una petición, Dorothea.

—¿De qué se trata? —dijo ella con el alma llena de temor.

—Quiero que me hagas saber, plenamente consciente, si, en el caso de mi muerte, darás cumplimiento a mis deseos: si evitarás hacer lo que yo desapruebe y te consagrarás a lo que yo desee.

Aquella petición no constituyó una sorpresa para Dorothea: muchos detalles la habían llevado a conjeturar la existencia de algún propósito de su marido que podía traducirse en un nuevo yugo para ella. Pasaron unos instantes sin que se produjera una respuesta.

—¿Te niegas a hacerlo? —dijo el señor Casaubon con tono algo más cortante.

—No, no me niego todavía —dijo Dorothea, con voz clara, al afirmarse en su interior la necesidad de conservar la libertad—, pero es demasiado solemne… Creo que no es justo… tener que hacer una promesa cuando ignoro las obligaciones que comporta. Cualquier cosa que me sugiera el afecto la haré sin necesidad de prometer nada.

—Pero utilizarás tu propio discernimiento: yo te pido que sigas el mío, y tú te niegas.

—¡No, no! —dijo Dorothea, con voz suplicante, abrumada por temores contradictorios—. ¿No me sería posible esperar y reflexionar un poco más? Deseo con toda mi alma hacer lo que te sirva de consuelo; pero no puedo hacer una promesa de manera tan repentina… y menos aún la de hacer algo que todavía ignoro.

—¿Quiere eso decir que dudas de la rectitud de mis deseos?

—Concédeme hasta mañana —dijo Dorothea, otra vez con tono suplicante.

—Hasta mañana entonces —dijo el señor Casaubon.

La pobre Dorothea advirtió muy pronto que su marido dormía; para ella, en cambio, el sueño había terminado. Mientras se obligaba a permanecer inmóvil para no molestarlo, en su interior se desarrollaba un conflicto en el que la imaginación agrupaba sus fuerzas primero de un lado y luego del otro. A Dorothea no se le ocurrió que el control que el señor Casaubon quería obtener sobre sus futuras acciones no tuviera relación con su obra inacabada. Le parecía, en cambio, suficientemente claro que su marido esperaba que seleccionase aquellos heterogéneos montones de datos que habían de ser las dudosas ilustraciones de principios todavía más dudosos. La pobre criatura había llegado a no creer en absoluto en la validez de aquella llave que encerraba la ambición y los esfuerzos de toda una vida. No es sorprendente que, a pesar de su escasa formación, el juicio de Dorothea en aquellas materias fuese más certero que el de su marido, ya que utilizaba unos criterios comparativos desprovistos de prejuicios y un saludable sentido común para valorar probabilidades en las que él había arriesgado todo su egoísmo. Y ahora Dorothea se representaba con la imaginación los días, los meses y los años que necesitaría para ordenar lo que podía calificarse de momias hechas añicos, y de fragmentos de una tradición que era en sí misma un mosaico elaborado con restos de ruinas… ordenándolas como alimento de una teoría tan marchita ya en el momento de nacer como el hijo de un duende. No hay duda de que un vigoroso error vigorosamente trabajado ha servido para mantener con vida los embriones de la verdad: la búsqueda del oro, al ser al mismo tiempo una interrogación sobre las sustancias en general, consigue que el cuerpo de la química esté preparado para recibir su alma, y así nace Lavoisier. Pero la teoría del señor Casaubon sobre los elementos que constituían la semilla de todas las tradiciones no era probable que se rozara accidentalmente con otros descubrimientos: flotaba entre flexibles conjeturas sin mayor solidez que esas etimologías que parecían sólidas por la semejanza entre dos sonidos, hasta que se demostró que esa semejanza, precisamente, las hacían imposibles: se trataba de un método interpretativo tan poco verificable y tan incapaz de crear aristas en condiciones de tropezar con la realidad como una descripción pormenorizada de Gog y Magog[115]; tan a salvo de sufrir interrupciones como un plan para enhebrar estrellas. Y Dorothea ¡había tenido que refrenar tantas veces su impaciencia y ocultar su cansancio ante aquella dudosa tarea de adivinar acertijos, que era lo que había acabado siendo su participación en los conocimientos sublimes que iban a hacer de su vida algo más digno de ser vivido! Comprendía con bastante claridad por qué su marido había llegado a asirse a ella como única

esperanza de que su tarea alcanzara un grado de sistematización capaz de darla a conocer al mundo. Al principio tuvo la impresión de que el señor Casaubon quería mantenerla también al margen de cualquier conocimiento pormenorizado de lo que estaba haciendo; pero gradualmente las terribles exigencias de la caducidad humana… la perspectiva de una muerte demasiado rápida…

Y aquí la compasión de Dorothea pasó de su propio futuro al pasado de su marido; más aún, a su desesperado batallar presente con un destino que había surgido de aquel pasado: el trabajo solitario, la ambición respirando con dificultad bajo el peso de la desconfianza en sí mismo; la meta que se aleja y las extremidades que cada vez pesan más; ¡y ahora, finalmente, la espada que se balanceaba con toda claridad sobre su cabeza! Y ¿no había querido ella casarse con él para ayudarlo en la tarea de toda una vida? Si bien Dorothea creyó que se trataba de algo mucho más grande, algo a lo que podría consagrarse con devoción por su valor intrínseco. ¿Era justo, incluso para calmar el dolor de su marido… sería posible, incluso aunque ella lo prometiera… trabajar como en una noria, sin fruto alguno?

Y, sin embargo, ¿podía decirle que no? ¿Podía decir: «me niego a satisfacer ese deseo tan vehemente»? Sería negarse a hacer por él, una vez muerto, lo que casi con toda seguridad haría si siguiera vivo. Si vivía lo que Lydgate había dicho que podía llegar a vivir, quince años, o aun más, Dorothea, sin duda, consumiría su existencia ayudándolo y obedeciéndole.

Pero existía de todas formas una profunda diferencia entre la devoción a los vivos y aquella indefinida promesa de consagrarse a los muertos. Mientras viviera el señor Casaubon, Dorothea tenía la libertad de protestar, de negarse incluso, a cualquier exigencia de su marido. Pero —la idea le pasó por la cabeza más de una vez, aunque se negase a darle crédito— ¿no cabía que pretendiera exigirle algo que ella ni siquiera era capaz de imaginar, puesto que su marido quería que se comprometiera a cumplir sus deseos sin decirle exactamente cuáles eran? No; el corazón del señor Casaubon estaba fijo en su tarea: ese era el fin por el que su vida, que se apagaba, tenía que verse complementada por la de Dorothea.

Y ahora, si ella dijese: «¡No! Si mueres, no moveré un dedo para terminar tu trabajo»… sería como si estuviese aplastando aquel corazón tan maltrecho.

Dorothea se debatió durante cuatro horas en aquel conflicto, hasta sentirse enferma y perpleja, incapaz de decidir, rezando en silencio. Tan desfallecida como una niña que ha sollozado y que ha buscado demasiado tiempo, se quedó dormida muy de mañana y, cuando despertó, el señor Casaubon se había levantado ya. Tantripp le dijo que su marido había recitado sus oraciones y desayunado y que ya estaba en la biblioteca.

—Nunca la había visto a usted tan pálida, señora —dijo Tantripp, una mujer de sólida figura que había estado con las hermanas Brooke en Lausana.

—¿Es que he tenido alguna vez buen color, Tantripp? —dijo Dorothea, sonriendo apenas.

—No sé si muy buen color, pero por lo menos estaba usted tan lozana como una rosa. ¿Qué puede esperarse, de todos modos, oliendo siempre esos libros con tapas de cuero? Descanse un poco esta mañana, señora. Déjeme decir que se encuentra enferma y que no puede encerrarse en la biblioteca.

—¡No, no! Tenemos que darnos prisa —dijo Dorothea—. El señor Casaubon quiere verme hoy de manera muy especial.

Al bajar la escalera estaba convencida de que le prometería cumplir sus deseos; pero que sería más adelante durante el día… no en aquel mismo momento.

Cuando Dorothea entró en la biblioteca, el señor Casaubon se volvió, apartándose de la mesa donde había estado colocando algunos libros y dijo:

—Te aguardaba, querida. Tenía la esperanza de ponerme a trabajar en seguida, pero me noto un poco indispuesto, quizá por las excesivas emociones de ayer. Voy a dar un paseo por el jardín, aprovechando que hace menos frío.

—Me parece muy bien —dijo Dorothea—. Me temo que anoche trabajaste demasiado.

—Me gustaría quedarme tranquilo respecto al último punto del que hablamos, Dorothea. Espero que ahora estés en condiciones de dar una respuesta.

—¿Puedo verte en el jardín dentro de un momento? —dijo Dorothea, tratando de conseguir un pequeño respiro.

—Estaré en el paseo de los tejos durante la próxima media hora —dijo el señor Casaubon, saliendo a continuación de la biblioteca.

Dorothea, sintiéndose muy cansada, llamó a Tantripp para pedir que le trajera algo con que abrigarse. Llevaba unos cuantos minutos sin moverse, aunque eso no significaba la reanudación del conflicto: se daba cuenta, sencillamente, de que iba a consentir, firmando así su propia sentencia; era demasiado débil, la aterraba demasiado la idea de asestar un golpe mortal a su marido, para poder hacer algo que no fuera

someterse por completo. Siguió inmóvil, permitiendo que Tantripp le pusiera el sombrero y el chal con una pasividad desacostumbrada, porque le gustaba vestirse sola.

—¡Dios la bendiga, señora! —dijo Tantripp, con un incontenible movimiento de amor hacia aquella hermosa y amable criatura por quien no podía ya hacer nada más, ahora que había terminado de ajustarle el sombrero.

Las palabras de su criada fueron demasiado para la tensa situación de Dorothea y no pudo contener las lágrimas, sollozando contra el brazo de Tantripp. Muy pronto se repuso, sin embargo, y se dirigió hacia el jardín atravesando la puerta de cristal.

—Me gustaría que todos los libros de esa biblioteca sirvieran para hacer una catacumba donde meter a tu amo —le dijo Tantripp a Pratt, el mayordomo, al encontrarlo en el comedor. Tantripp había estado en Roma y visitó los monumentos antiguos, como ya sabemos; y siempre insistía en llamar al señor Casaubon «tu amo» cuando hablaba con otro de los criados.

Pratt se echó a reír. Sentía mucho afecto por su amo, pero Tantripp le gustaba todavía más.

Cuando Dorothea se halló en uno de los caminos de grava, se demoró entre el grupo más cercano de árboles, vacilando, como ya lo hiciera en otra ocasión anterior, aunque por una razón distinta. Entonces había temido que su esfuerzo por compartir la soledad de su marido no fuese bien recibido; ahora le asustaba dirigirse al sitio donde preveía que iba a verse obligada a compartir algo de lo que quisiera evadirse. Ni la ley ni la opinión del mundo la obligaban a hacer aquello: tan solo el carácter de su marido y su propia compasión… no el yugo real del matrimonio, sino el ideal. Dorothea veía con suficiente claridad su situación y, sin embargo, estaba encadenada: no podía golpear al alma afligida que se volvía, suplicante, hacia ella. Si aquello era debilidad, Dorothea era débil. Casi había transcurrido ya la media hora, y no era posible retrasar más tiempo su respuesta. Al entrar en el paseo de los tejos no vio a su marido; como el recorrido tenía curvas, Dorothea siguió adelante, esperando vislumbrar su figura envuelta en la capa azul que, junto con un abrigado gorro de terciopelo, formaba su habitual indumentaria para salir al jardín en los días fríos. Luego se le ocurrió que quizá estuviera descansando en el cenador, hacia donde el camino se desviaba un poco. Al doblar la esquina, lo vio sentado en un banco, junto a la mesa de piedra. Sus brazos descansaban sobre la mesa y la frente reposaba sobre ellos, con lo que la capa azul caía hacia adelante, cubriéndole los dos lados de la cara.

«Se cansó demasiado anoche», pensó Dorothea, creyendo al principio que estaba dormido y que el cenador era un sitio demasiado húmedo para descansar. Después recordó que en los últimos tiempos le había visto adoptar aquella postura cuando ella le leía, porque la encontraba más cómoda que ninguna otra; y que a veces hablaba y también escuchaba, con el rostro en aquella posición. De manera que entró en el cenador y dijo:

—He venido, Edward; estoy preparada.

Su marido no le hizo caso y Dorothea pensó que debía de estar profundamente dormido. Le puso una mano en el hombro y repitió:

—¡Estoy preparada!

Él siguió sin moverse; y con un miedo repentino, atropelladamente, se inclinó sobre él, le quitó el gorro de terciopelo y acercó la mejilla a su cabeza, exclamando con tono angustiado:

—¡Despierta, Edward, despierta! Escúchame. He venido a responderte.

Pero nunca pudo ya darle su respuesta.

Más tarde, durante el día, Lydgate se hallaba sentado junto a la cabecera de su cama y Dorothea deliraba, pensando en voz alta y recordando todo lo que había pasado por su cabeza la noche anterior. Se daba cuenta de quién la escuchaba y lo llamaba por su nombre, pero parecía creer que estaba bien contarle todo lo que había pasado; y, una y otra vez, insistía en que se lo explicara a su marido.

—Dígale que iré pronto a verlo: estoy dispuesta a prometerle lo que quiere. Pero pensar en ello era tan espantoso… que ha hecho que enferme. No es que esté muy enferma. Mejoraré en seguida. Vaya y dígaselo.

Ningún sonido, sin embargo, sería ya capaz de romper el silencio en los oídos del señor Casaubon.

Capítulo XLIX

Un problema demasiado difícil para conjuros de magos
había creado aquel caballero;
es fácil tirar piedras a los pozos,
pero ¿quién las sacará?

—Daría cualquier cosa por evitar que Dorothea se enterara —dijo sir James Chettam, con el entrecejo fruncido y un gesto de intensa repugnancia en la boca.

Se hallaba de pie sobre la alfombra, junto al hogar de la chimenea, en la biblioteca de Lowick Manor, un día después del entierro del señor Casaubon, hablando con el señor Brooke. Dorothea no estaba aún en condiciones de abandonar su habitación.

—Eso sería difícil, Chettam, si me permite decírselo, puesto que mi sobrina es albacea y le gustan esas cosas: propiedades, tierras, todo eso. Es una mujer con ideas, ya sabe usted —dijo el señor Brooke, calándose las gafas con gesto nervioso y explorando los bordes de un papel doblado que tenía en la mano—; y querrá hacer lo que sea preciso, puede estar seguro, Dorothea querrá ocuparse de todo por su condición de albacea. Y cumplió los veintiuno en diciembre, ya sabe. No puedo impedir que se entere de todo.

Sir James contempló la alfombra en silencio durante un minuto y luego, alzando los ojos y fijándolos repentinamente en el señor Brooke, dijo:

—Voy a explicarle lo que podemos hacer. Mientras Dorothea siga indispuesta, no debe ocuparse de nada y, tan pronto como sea posible trasladarla, se vendrá con nosotros. Estar con Celia y con el niño será la mejor cosa del mundo para ella y la tendrá ocupada. Y mientras tanto debe usted librarse de Ladislaw; tiene que mandarlo fuera de Inglaterra. —Aquí el gesto de repugnancia de sir James reapareció con toda su intensidad.

El señor Brooke se llevó las manos a la espalda, anduvo hasta la ventana y se enderezó con una pequeña sacudida antes de responder.

—Eso se dice muy fácilmente, Chettam; decirlo no cuesta nada, desde luego.

—Mi querido señor —insistió sir James, conteniendo su indignación dentro de fórmulas respetuosas—, fue usted quien lo trajo aquí y quien hizo que se quedara, quiero decir, gracias a la ocupación que usted le dio.

—Sí, pero no puedo despedirlo en un instante sin darle un motivo, mi querido Chettam. Ladislaw ha resultado ser un colaborador muy valioso, extraordinariamente satisfactorio. Estoy convencido de haber hecho un gran servicio a esta zona del país trayéndolo… haciéndole venir, dese cuenta. —El señor Brooke terminó con una inclinación de cabeza y se volvió hacia su interlocutor para hacerla.

—Es una lástima que esta zona del país no haya podido pasarse sin él, es todo lo que tengo que decir sobre ese asunto. En cualquier caso, como cuñado de Dorothea, me siento autorizado para oponerme con energía a que continúe aquí gracias a la protección de cualquiera de sus parientes. Espero que admita usted que tengo derecho a hablar sobre todo lo que haga referencia a la dignidad de la hermana de mi mujer.

Sir James se estaba acalorando.

—Claro que sí, mi querido Chettam, claro que sí. Pero usted y yo tenemos diferentes ideas… diferentes…

—Confío en que eso no sea cierto en lo que atañe a esta acción de Casaubon —le interrumpió sir James —. Lo que yo digo es que ha comprometido a Dorothea de la forma más injusta. Sostengo que no se ha

cometido nunca una acción más mezquina y menos caballerosa: un codicilo de esa especie, a un testamento que otorgó en el momento de su matrimonio con el conocimiento y el respaldo de la familia de su esposa… ¡se trata de un claro insulto a Dorothea!

—Bueno, dese cuenta de que Casaubon tenía una actitud un poco retorcida con Ladislaw. El mismo Ladislaw me ha contado el motivo… desagrado por la dirección que había tomado, ya sabe usted… Ladislaw no tenía muy buena opinión de las ideas de Casaubon, Thoth y Dagon… ese tipo de cosas; e imagino que no le gustó el puesto que Ladislaw había aceptado en Middlemarch. He visto su correspondencia, ¿se da usted cuenta? El pobre Casaubon vivía un poco enterrado en sus libros… no sabía nada del mundo.

—A Ladislaw le resulta muy conveniente hacer ver las cosas de esa manera —dijo sir James—. Pero yo creo que Casaubon solo estaba celoso de él por causa de Dorothea, y el mundo entero supondrá que ella le había dado algún motivo; y eso es lo que hace este asunto tan abominable… unir su nombre con el de ese joven.

—Mi querido Chettam, todo eso no tendrá ninguna consecuencia, se lo aseguro —dijo el señor Brooke, sentándose y calándose de nuevo las gafas—. Está ligado a las rarezas de Casaubon. Este papel, por ejemplo, «ordenación sinóptica» y todo lo demás, «para uso de la señora Casaubon», se hallaba guardado bajo llave en el escritorio junto con el testamento. Supongo que su finalidad es que Dorothea publique sus investigaciones, ¿no le parece?, y ella lo hará, esté seguro; se ha interesado por sus estudios de manera excepcional.

—Mi querido señor —dijo sir James con impaciencia—, todo eso no viene al caso. El problema consiste en saber si está usted de acuerdo conmigo en la conveniencia de alejar de aquí al joven Ladislaw.

—Bueno, no estoy de acuerdo en la urgencia de esa medida. A la larga, quizá no sea problemática. En cuanto a las habladurías, ya sabe usted, alejarlo de aquí no impedirá que las haya. La gente habla de lo que le gusta hablar y no de aquello sobre lo que tiene información exacta —dijo el señor Brooke, mostrándose agudo con verdades que favorecían sus propios deseos—. Podría librarme de Ladislaw hasta cierto punto… retirarlo de la dirección del *Pionero* y todo eso; pero no puedo sacarlo del país si él no quiere irse… si prefiere quedarse, compréndalo usted.

El señor Brooke, insistiendo con la misma tranquilidad que si estuviesen hablando del tiempo que había hecho el año anterior y moviendo la cabeza al terminar, con su acostumbrada afabilidad, constituía un ejemplo exasperante de obstinación.

—¡Cielo santo! —dijo sir James, alcanzando su máxima cota de apasionamiento—, consigámosle un puesto, gastémonos dinero en él. ¡Si pudiera marcharse en el séquito de algún gobernador colonial! Quizá Grampus lo acepte… y yo podría escribir a Fulke hablándole de ello.

—Ladislaw no se dejará embarcar como una cabeza de ganado, mi querido amigo; Ladislaw tiene sus ideas. Estoy convencido de que si se separase de mí mañana, solo serviría para que se oyera hablar más de él en el país. Con su talento para hacer discursos y redactar documentos, hay pocos hombres que puedan estar a su altura como agitador… no sé si se da usted cuenta.

—¡Agitador! —dijo sir James, con entonación mordaz, sintiendo que las sílabas de aquella palabra adecuadamente repetidas bastaban para exponer con toda claridad su carácter odioso.

—Sea razonable, Chettam. Pensemos en Dorothea. Como usted dice, lo mejor es que esté junto a Celia lo antes posible. Que viva bajo su techo y mientras tanto las cosas quizá lleguen a arreglarse tranquilamente. Vamos a no gastar nuestra pólvora en salvas, compréndalo usted. Standish guardará silencio y todo este asunto se habrá hecho viejo antes de que alguien llegue a saberlo. Pueden surgir veinte motivos para que Ladislaw se vaya… sin que yo tenga que hacer nada, dese cuenta.

—¿Debo entonces concluir que no está usted dispuesto a actuar?

—¿Que no estoy dispuesto?… No… yo no he dicho eso. Pero, si he de serle franco, no veo qué es lo que puedo hacer. Ladislaw es un caballero.

—¡Me alegro mucho de oírlo! —dijo sir James, a quien la irritación estaba haciendo perder un poco los estribos—. Estoy seguro de que Casaubon no lo era.

—Bueno, aún habría sido peor si el codicilo le impidiera volver a casarse con cualquiera, dese usted cuenta.

—No estoy nada seguro de eso —dijo sir James—. No habría sido una falta tan grande de delicadeza.

—¡Una más de las rarezas del pobre Casaubon! Aquel ataque le afectó un poco el cerebro. Todo eso no significa nada. Dorothea no quiere casarse con Ladislaw.

—Ese codicilo, sin embargo, está redactado para hacer que todo el mundo piense que sí lo desea. No creo nada parecido de Dorothea —dijo sir James, frunciendo a continuación el entrecejo—, pero sí tengo

sospechas de Ladislaw. Se lo digo a usted con toda franqueza, sospecho de Ladislaw.

—Yo no podría tomar ninguna medida basándome en eso, Chettam. De hecho, si fuera posible deshacerse de él… enviarlo a la isla de Norfolk… ese tipo de cosas… el resultado sería aún más perjudicial para Dorothea a los ojos de quienes estén al tanto de lo sucedido. Parecería como si desconfiáramos de ella… como si no tuviéramos confianza, dese cuenta.

Que el señor Brooke hubiese encontrado un argumento de innegable validez no sirvió para calmar a sir James. Extendió la mano para coger el sombrero, dando a entender que no tenía intención de seguir discutiendo y dijo, todavía con algún acaloramiento:

—Bien, solo puedo decir que, en mi opinión, a Dorothea se la sacrificó una vez porque sus familiares tuvieron muy poco cuidado. En esta ocasión haré todo lo que esté a mi alcance, como hermano suyo, para protegerla.

—No puede usted hacer nada mejor que llevarla a Freshitt Hall cuanto antes, Chettam. Estoy totalmente de acuerdo con ese plan —dijo el señor Brooke, muy contento de salir victorioso de la discusión. No le convenía nada desprenderse de Ladislaw en aquel momento, cuando podía disolverse la Cámara de un día para otro y era preciso convencer a los electores del mejor camino para servir a los intereses del país. El señor Brooke creía sinceramente que podía lograrse aquel fin si él regresaba al Parlamento: con toda honradez ofrecía el poder de su inteligencia a la nación.

Capítulo L

—Este lolardo nos hará una prédica.
—¡No, por el alma de mi padre!, eso no lo hará
—dijo el marinero— ni predicará,
ni glosará el Evangelio ni enseñará.
Todos creemos en Dios Todopoderoso —dijo—.
Y él nos plantearía alguna dificultad.

Cuentos de Canterbury

Dorothea llevaba ya casi una semana a salvo en Freshitt Hall cuando empezó a hacer preguntas peligrosas. Todas las mañanas se instalaba con Celia en el más bonito de los cuartos de estar del piso alto, que daba a un pequeño invernadero: Celia, en blanco y lavanda, como un ramo de violetas de dos colores, contemplaba los notables actos del bebé, tan misteriosos para su mente inexperta que todas las conversaciones se veían interrumpidas por sus llamamientos a la oracular nodriza para que los interpretara. Dorothea se sentaba a su lado, vestida de luto, con una expresión que más bien exasperaba a Celia por parecerle demasiado triste; porque no solo el bebé disfrutaba de excelente salud, sino que, a decir verdad, cuando un marido ha sido aburrido y molesto en vida y además de eso había… ¡vamos, vamos! Sir James, por supuesto, se lo había contado todo a Celia, insistiendo mucho en la importancia de que Dorothea no lo supiera antes de que fuera estrictamente inevitable.

Pero el señor Brooke estuvo en lo cierto al pronosticar que Dorothea no permanecería inactiva mucho tiempo ante la tarea que le había sido asignada; no ignoraba el tenor del testamento redactado en la época de su matrimonio, y su pensamiento, en cuanto tomó conciencia de su posición, empezó a ocuparse en silencio de lo que debía hacer, como dueña y señora de Lowick Manor, con el patronazgo del beneficio eclesiástico unido a la propiedad.

Una mañana, cuando su tío les hizo su habitual visita, aunque en aquella ocasión con una animación poco frecuente en el porte, animación que el señor Brooke explicó diciendo que ya era bastante seguro que el Parlamento sería disuelto sin tardanza, Dorothea dijo:

—Tío, parece justo que considere quién debe recibir el beneficio de Lowick. Desde que se encontró un nuevo puesto para el señor Tucker, nunca he oído decir a mi marido que hubiera pensado en ningún clérigo como posible sucesor suyo. Creo que debería disponer de las llaves para ir a Lowick y examinar los papeles de mi marido. Quizá encuentre algo que permita descubrir cuáles eran sus deseos.

—No hay ninguna prisa —respondió el señor Brooke, con gran tranquilidad—. Con el tiempo podrás ir, desde luego, si lo deseas. He repasado el contenido de escritorios y cajones… y no había nada… Nada excepto cosas muy elevadas, ya sabes, además del testamento. Todo se puede ir haciendo a la larga. En cuanto al beneficio, ya tengo a alguien que ha manifestado interés… Yo diría que se trata de un buen candidato. El señor Tyke me ha sido recomendado encarecidamente… Ya tuve algo que ver con que se le eligiera para otro cargo. Un hombre muy apostólico, según creo, una persona muy adecuada en mi opinión…

—Me gustaría saber más cosas acerca de él, tío, y juzgar por mí misma, si el señor Casaubon no ha especificado sus deseos. Quizá haya hecho alguna adición al testamento… Puede que me haya dejado instrucciones —dijo Dorothea, que durante todo aquel tiempo había supuesto algo así en relación con la obra de su marido.

—Nada acerca de la rectoría, querida, nada en absoluto —dijo el señor Brooke, levantándose para marcharse y ofreciendo la mano a sus sobrinas—; tampoco acerca de sus investigaciones. Nada en el testamento. —A Dorothea le temblaron los labios—. Vamos, vamos, no debes pensar en esas cosas todavía. Deja que pase algún tiempo, ya me entiendes.

—Estoy perfectamente bien, tío; deseo hacer algo que requiera esfuerzo.

—Bueno, bueno, ya veremos. Ahora debo irme a toda prisa… Tengo muchísimo trabajo… Se trata de una crisis… una crisis política, date cuenta. Y aquí están Celia y su hombrecito… y tú ya eres tía, date cuenta, y yo casi abuelo —dijo el señor Brooke, tranquilamente presuroso, deseoso de marcharse y de decirle a Chettam que no sería culpa suya si Dorothea insistía en enterarse de todo.

Dorothea se recostó en la silla cuando su tío hubo salido de la habitación y bajó los ojos en actitud meditabunda hacia sus manos cruzadas.

—¡Mira, Dodo! ¡Míralo! ¿Has visto nunca algo parecido? —dijo Celia con su sosegada manera de hablar.

—¿El qué, Kitty? —preguntó Dorothea, alzando los ojos con expresión bastante ausente.

—¿El qué? Pues el labio superior; mira cómo lo saca, como si quisiera hacer un gesto. ¿No es maravilloso? Puede que hasta tenga sus pequeñas ideas. Me gustaría que estuviese aquí la nodriza. Míralo, por favor.

Una gran lágrima que llevaba algún tiempo formándose resbaló por la mejilla de Dorothea mientras levantaba los ojos y trataba de sonreír.

—No estés triste, Dodo; dale un beso al niño. ¿Qué es lo que te hace cavilar tanto? Estoy segura de que hiciste todo lo posible y mucho más de lo necesario. Ahora deberías ser feliz.

—Me pregunto si sir James podría llevarme a Lowick. Quiero revisarlo todo… ver si hay algo para mí.

—No debes ir hasta que el señor Lydgate te lo autorice. Y eso no lo ha hecho todavía (ya ha llegado usted, nodriza; coja al niño y paséelo por la galería). Además, has vuelto a equivocarte como de costumbre, Dodo… Lo veo con toda claridad: y me molesta.

—¿En qué estoy equivocada, Kitty? —dijo Dorothea, con gran humildad. Ahora estaba casi dispuesta a considerar a Celia más juiciosa que ella, y se preguntaba en verdad con cierto temor cuál podría ser aquella equivocación. Celia se daba cuenta de su superioridad y estaba decidida a aprovecharla. Nadie conocía a Dorothea ni sabía manejarla tan bien como ella. Desde el nacimiento de su hijo, Celia tenía un nuevo concepto de su solidez mental y de su prudencia tranquila. Le parecía de una claridad meridiana que donde había un bebé las cosas estaban bien y que el error, en general, no era más que una simple ausencia de aquella fuerza central estabilizadora.

—Me doy perfecta cuenta de lo que estás pensando, Dodo —dijo Celia—. Quieres descubrir si hay algo desagradable que tengas que hacer, solo por respetar los deseos del señor Casaubon. Como si no hubieras sufrido ya bastante. Y no se lo merece, como tendrás ocasión de comprobar. Se ha portado muy mal. James no podría estar más furioso con él. Y sería mejor que te lo dijera yo misma para que te fueses preparando.

—Celia —dijo Dorothea, con tono suplicante—, no hagas que me angustie. Dime inmediatamente de qué se trata. —Por su cabeza cruzó la idea de que el señor Casaubon había dejado sus propiedades a otra persona… cosa que no le importaría demasiado

—Pues no ha hecho más que añadir un codicilo al testamento, para decir que las propiedades no pasarían a tus manos en el caso de que te casaras… quiero decir…

—Eso no tiene la menor importancia —dijo Dorothea, interrumpiéndola con gran ímpetu.

—Pero solo si te casabas con el señor Ladislaw y no con cualquier otra persona —continuó Celia, con perseverante tranquilidad—. Por supuesto no tiene ninguna importancia, porque tú no te casarías nunca con el señor Ladislaw, pero eso hace que el comportamiento del señor Casaubon sea aún peor.

Dorothea sintió cómo la sangre se le agolpaba en el rostro y en la garganta. Celia, sin embargo, le estaba administrando lo que consideraba una conveniente dosis de hechos. Se trataba de rebatir ideas que habían dañado mucho la salud de Dodo. De manera que continuó con su tono neutral, como si hubiera estado hablando de la ropa del bebé.

—James lo ha dicho así. Dice que es una cosa abominable e impropia de un caballero. Y nunca ha habido mejor juez que James. Es como si el señor Casaubon quisiera hacer creer a la gente que tú tenías intención de casarte con el señor Ladislaw… lo que es completamente ridículo. James dice que en realidad pretendía desanimar al señor Ladislaw para que no intentara casarse contigo por tu dinero… ¡como si alguna vez se le pudiera ocurrir pedirte en matrimonio! La señora Cadwallader dice que sería como si te casaras con un italiano domador de ratones blancos. Ahora tengo que irme a ver cómo está el bebé —añadió Celia, sin el menor cambio de tono, cubriéndose con un chal ligero y marchándose con pasos muy rápidos.

Dorothea había recuperado para entonces su anterior palidez y se dejó caer débilmente hacia atrás en la silla. Podría haber comparado su experiencia de aquel momento con una imprecisa y alarmada toma de conciencia de que su vida estaba adoptando una forma nueva, de que toda ella sufría una metamorfosis en la que la memoria no era capaz de ajustarse al despertar de nuevos órganos. Todo estaba cambiando de aspecto: la conducta de su marido, sus propios sentimientos de sumisión hacia él, las confrontaciones entre los dos… y, aún más, toda su relación con Will Ladislaw. Su mundo estaba en una situación de cambio violentísimo; lo único que podía decirse con claridad era que necesitaba esperar y pensar de forma diferente. Hubo un cambio que la aterrorizó como si se tratara de un pecado; y fue un intenso sentimiento de repulsión hacia su marido desaparecido, un marido que había tenido pensamientos ocultos, falseando quizá todo lo que ella había dicho y hecho. Después se dio cuenta de otro cambio que también la hizo temblar: un repentino y extraño anhelo de su corazón que se volcaba en Will Ladislaw. Antes nunca se le había ocurrido que pudiera, en ninguna circunstancia, llegar a ser su amante; considérese el efecto de la revelación repentina de que otra persona lo hubiese visto bajo aquella luz —de que quizá él mismo fuera consciente de semejante posibilidad—, y esto con la apresurada, agobiante visión, de unas circunstancias desfavorables y de dudas que tardarían en resolverse.

Le pareció que pasaba mucho tiempo —no supo cuánto— hasta que oyó decir a Celia:

—Eso es suficiente, nodriza; ahora se quedará tranquilo en mi regazo. Váyase a almorzar y que Garratt se quede en la habitación vecina. Lo que yo creo, Dodo —continuó Celia, observando únicamente que Dorothea se recostaba en el asiento y que su actitud sería probablemente pasiva—, es que el señor Casaubon era una persona rencorosa. A mí nunca me gustó y a James tampoco. Siempre he pensado que las comisuras de su boca eran terriblemente rencorosas. Y ahora que se ha portado de esa manera, estoy segura de que la religión no te exige que te intranquilices por causa suya. Ha sido una bendición que Dios se lo haya llevado y deberías estar agradecida. No tienes por qué apesadumbrarte, ¿no es cierto, pequeñín mío? —dijo Celia en confidencia a aquel centro y equilibrio inconsciente del mundo, que poseía los puños más increíbles, completos incluso hasta las uñas, y pelo suficiente, cuando se le quitaba el gorro, para hacer… nadie sabía exactamente qué; en resumen, se podía decir de él que era un Buda con apariencia occidental.

En aquellos momentos de crisis se anunció la llegada de Lydgate y una de las primeras cosas que este dijo fue:

—Me temo que no está usted tan bien como ayer, señora Casaubon, ¿ha surgido algún nuevo motivo de preocupación? Permítame tomarle el pulso. —La mano de Dorothea tenía la frialdad del mármol.

—Quiere ir a Lowick a examinar documentos —dijo Celia—. ¿No cree usted que sería perjudicial?

Lydgate tardó unos momentos en responder. Luego dijo, mirando a Dorothea:

—Es difícil saberlo. En mi opinión, la señora Casaubon debería hacer lo que le produjera mayor reposo mental. Y ese reposo no siempre se logrará prohibiéndole que se busque ocupaciones.

—Gracias —dijo Dorothea, haciendo un esfuerzo—. Estoy segura de la prudencia de su consejo. Son muchas las cosas de las que debo ocuparme. ¿Por qué tendría que seguir aquí sin hacer nada? —Luego, procurando volver sobre temas que no estuvieran relacionados con la causa de su agitación, añadió, bruscamente—: Creo que conoce a todo el mundo en Middlemarch, señor Lydgate. Voy a pedirle que me cuente muchísimas cosas. Tengo asuntos serios de que ocuparme, como la concesión de un beneficio eclesiástico. Usted conoce al señor Tyke y a todos los… —Pero el esfuerzo de Dorothea había estado por encima de sus posibilidades; al llegar a aquel punto dejó de hablar y rompió en sollozos.

Lydgate le administró unas sales.

—Permita que la señora Casaubon haga lo que quiera —le dijo a sir James, a quien solicitó ver antes de marcharse—. Creo que más que cualquier otra prescripción lo que necesita es libertad total.

Haber atendido a Dorothea durante los días de su agitación mental permitió a Lydgate sacar algunas conclusiones certeras sobre las tribulaciones de su existencia. Tenía la seguridad de que la señora Casaubon había sufrido las tensiones y los conflictos surgidos de reprimir la propia personalidad; y era muy probable que ahora se sintiera sometida a otro tipo de encierro apenas distinto del que acababa de dejar.

A sir James se le hizo mucho más fácil seguir los consejos de Lydgate cuando supo que Celia ya le había dicho a su hermana la desagradable verdad sobre el testamento. Ya no tenía remedio; no había la menor razón para que no se ocupara de los asuntos más importantes. Y al día siguiente sir James accedió de inmediato a la petición de Dorothea de que la llevara a Lowick.

—No tengo el menor deseo de quedarme allí de momento —dijo Dorothea—; difícilmente podría resistirlo. Soy mucho más feliz en Freshitt Hall con Celia. Viéndolo desde lejos podré pensar con más claridad sobre lo que debe hacerse en Lowick. Y me gustaría pasar una temporada en Tipton Grange con mi tío para volver a recorrer los viejos paseos y a hablar con la gente del pueblo.

—Creo que no es aún el mejor momento. Tu tío tiene huéspedes relacionados con la política y será mejor que permanezcas al margen de esos asuntos —dijo sir James, que en aquel momento consideraba sobre todo Tipton Grange la guarida del joven Ladislaw. Pero Dorothea y él no intercambiaron una sola palabra sobre la parte ofensiva del testamento; de hecho los dos sentían que sería imposible mencionarlo. Sir James era muy tímido, incluso con los de su mismo sexo, a la hora de abordar asuntos desagradables; y la única cosa que Dorothea hubiera deseado decir, en el caso de hablar del codicilo, le estaba prohibida en el momento presente porque parecería una prueba más de la injusticia de su marido. Sin embargo, quería que sir James conociera las diferencias de opinión entre su marido y ella acerca del derecho moral de Will Ladislaw a las propiedades familiares: quedaría claro, entonces, pensaba Dorothea, que la cláusula de su marido, extraña y poco delicada, provenía sobre todo de su enconada resistencia a admitir la existencia de ese derecho y no simplemente de sentimientos personales de los que era mucho más difícil hablar. También (es preciso admitirlo) Dorothea deseaba que aquello se supiera en beneficio de Will, ya que sus parientes parecían verlo tan solo como objeto de la caridad del señor Casaubon. ¿Qué necesidad había de compararlo con un italiano domador de ratones blancos? Las palabras de la señora Cadwallader parecían una caricatura burlona, trazada a oscuras por un dedo malicioso.

En Lowick, Dorothea registró todos los escritorios y cajones; examinó todos los sitios en que su marido podría haber depositado escritos de carácter privado, pero no encontró ningún papel expresamente dirigido a ella, si se exceptúa la «ordenación sinóptica», que probablemente no era más que la primera de otras muchas instrucciones por las que debería haberse guiado en el futuro. Al organizar aquel legado de trabajo para Dorothea, el señor Casaubon, como en todo lo demás, se había mostrado lento y vacilante, tan agobiado al planear la transmisión de sus estudios como al realizarlos, con la sensación de moverse penosamente en un medio cada vez más denso y mal iluminado: la desconfianza en la capacidad de Dorothea para ordenar lo que él había preparado solo se veía compensada por la desconfianza aún mayor en cualquier otro colaborador. Si bien, a la postre, había llegado a confiar en la integridad de su mujer: esta estaba autorizada a hacer lo que decidiera y gustosamente imaginaba su incansable laboriosidad bajo los grilletes creados por la promesa de edificarle una tumba con su nombre grabado en ella. (Aunque no sea cierto que el señor Casaubon diera el nombre de tumba a los futuros volúmenes: él los llamaba la *Llave de todas las mitologías*). Pero le había faltado tiempo, y sus planes quedaron solo esbozados: únicamente tuvo tiempo de solicitar la promesa con la que trataba de mantener su frío dominio sobre la vida de Dorothea.

Aquel intento de dominio había perdido toda su fuerza. Ligada por un compromiso surgido de lo más hondo de su compasión, Dorothea habría sido capaz de emprender una tarea que su sentido común le susurraba que era inútil desde todos los puntos de vista, excepto como prueba de fidelidad, que es una meta suprema. Ahora su discernimiento, en lugar de estar controlado por una respetuosa devoción, se había independizado gracias al amargo descubrimiento de que en su pasada unión había estado presente la invisible distancia producida por el secreto y la sospecha. El hombre vivo y sufriente no estaba ya delante de ella para despertar su compasión: quedaba tan solo el recuerdo de la penosa sujeción a un marido cuyos pensamientos eran más bajos de lo que había creído, cuyas exigencias exorbitantes habían llegado incluso a desvirtuar su cuidado escrupuloso por mantener su imagen de hombre de bien, y a destruir su propio orgullo escandalizando a hombres honorables. En cuanto a las propiedades que eran el signo de aquel lazo roto, Dorothea habría aceptado gustosa verse libre de ellas y disponer tan solo de su fortuna personal, que había conservado de acuerdo con las capitulaciones matrimoniales, si no hubieran existido otros deberes ligados al hecho de ser propietaria ante los que no debía echarse atrás. Sobre aquellas propiedades había también muchas preguntas inquietantes que insistían en salir a la superficie: ¿no estaba en lo cierto al pensar que correspondía a medias a Will Ladislaw? ¿No le resultaba ahora imposible, sin embargo, llevar a cabo aquel acto de justicia? El señor Casaubon había encontrado un medio cruelmente eficaz de impedírselo: incluso con el corazón lleno de indignación hacia él, a Dorothea le repugnaba cualquier acto que pareciera contrariar sus propósitos.

Después de recoger papeles relacionados con asuntos que deseaba examinar con más calma, cerró de nuevo con llave los escritorios y los cajones —en los que no había ningún mensaje personal para ella—, vacíos de cualquier signo de que, en las cavilaciones solitarias de su marido, el corazón le hubiese llevado a pedirle excusas o darle explicaciones; y Dorothea volvió a Freshitt Hall con el convencimiento de que nada había modificado la última y ardua exigencia de su marido y la última injuriosa afirmación de su poder.

Dorothea trató ahora de dirigir sus pensamientos hacia obligaciones inmediatas, entre las cuales había una que las demás personas estaban decididas a no dejarle olvidar. El oído de Lydgate había captado con gran interés su mención del beneficio eclesiástico, y tan pronto como pudo volvió a sacar el tema, viendo en ello una posibilidad de rectificar el voto negativo que había dado en otra ocasión con mala conciencia.

—En lugar de decirle nada sobre el señor Tyke —dijo el joven médico—, me gustaría hablarle de otro candidato… del señor Farebrother, el vicario de St Botolph. Su beneficio actual es muy poca cosa y le proporciona unos medios demasiado limitados para atender a sus necesidades y a las de su familia. Su madre, su tía y su hermana viven con él y dependen de él. Creo que no ha llegado a casarse por esa razón. Nunca he oído a nadie que predique tan bien, con una elocuencia tan fácil y sencilla. Hubiera podido predicar en St Paul's Cross después del viejo Latimer[116]. Su conversación es excelente sobre los temas más diversos: original, simple, clara. Creo que es una persona extraordinaria; debería haber hecho más de lo que ha hecho.

—¿Por qué no ha sido así? —quiso saber Dorothea, interesada ahora por todos aquellos que no habían logrado realizar sus aspiraciones.

—Es una pregunta difícil de contestar —dijo Lydgate—. Yo mismo descubro que es muy arduo conseguir que las cosas funcionen, incluso cuando se ha elegido bien: ¡son tantos los factores que influyen! Farebrother insinúa con frecuencia que se ha equivocado de profesión; necesita unas posibilidades más amplias que las que tiene un clérigo pobre y supongo que no cuenta con otros recursos. Es muy aficionado a la historia natural y a diferentes ramas de la ciencia y tiene dificultades para reconciliar esos gustos con su posición. No está en condiciones de ahorrar… Apenas dispone del dinero suficiente para los gastos de cada día, y eso le ha llevado a jugar a las cartas… Middlemarch es un sitio excelente para el *whist*. Juega por dinero y gana bastante. Eso le lleva a frecuentar a personas un tanto por debajo de él y lo hace descuidado en algunas cosas; y sin embargo, con todo ello, considerado en conjunto, creo que es uno de los hombres más intachables que he conocido nunca. No hay en él ni veneno ni doblez, defectos a menudo acompañados por un aspecto exterior más correcto.

—Quisiera saber si su conciencia le hace sufrir por esa costumbre —dijo Dorothea—; quisiera saber si desea abandonarla.

—No tengo la menor duda de que renunciaría a jugar si se encontrase en una situación económica más desahogada: le alegraría mucho poder dedicar ese tiempo a otras cosas.

—Mi tío asegura que al señor Tyke se le considera un hombre apostólico —dijo Dorothea con gesto reflexivo. Deseaba, en lo posible, restaurar el celo primitivo y, sin embargo, también pensaba en el señor Farebrother con un intenso deseo de rescatarlo de aquel sistema tan irregular de redondear sus ingresos.

—No pretendo afirmar que Farebrother sea apostólico —dijo Lydgate—. Su posición no es enteramente igual a la de los apóstoles: es tan solo un clérigo entre fieles cuyas vidas ha de esforzarse por hacer mejores. En la práctica, descubro que lo que ahora llaman ser apostólico consiste en manifestar impaciencia ante todo aquello en lo que el ministro en cuestión no desempeña un papel protagonista. He visto algo de eso en las actuaciones del señor Tyke en el hospital: buena parte de su doctrina consiste en hacer presión para que la gente sea desagradablemente consciente de su presencia. Además, ¡un hombre apostólico en Lowick! Tendría que pensar más bien, como san Francisco, en la necesidad de predicar a los pájaros.

—Cierto —dijo Dorothea—. Es difícil imaginar qué tipo de ideas sacan nuestros granjeros y jornaleros de tales enseñanzas. He estado hojeando un volumen de sermones del señor Tyke: su predicación no serviría de nada en Lowick… hablando de la predestinación y de las profecías del Apocalipsis. Siempre he pensado mucho en las diferentes maneras en que se enseña el cristianismo, y cuando encuentro alguna que pone de relieve todos los aspectos positivos, me aferro a ella como la más cierta… Hablo de las que abarcan la mayor cantidad de bien y consideran a la mayor cantidad posible de personas como partícipes en él. Sin duda es mejor perdonar demasiado que condenar demasiado. Me gustaría ver al señor Farebrother y oírlo predicar.

—Hágalo —dijo Lydgate—; tengo plena confianza en el resultado. Es un hombre muy querido, pero también tiene sus enemigos: siempre hay personas incapaces de perdonar a un hombre competente que no esté de acuerdo con ellas. Y ese asunto del dinero ganado con las cartas es realmente un borrón. Usted, claro está, no trata con muchos habitantes de Middlemarch; pero el señor Ladislaw, que ve con tanta frecuencia al señor Brooke, es un gran amigo de las ancianas parientes del señor Farebrother y estaría totalmente dispuesto a cantar las alabanzas del vicario. Una de esas ancianas, la señorita Noble, la tía, es un ejemplo maravillosamente pintoresco de bondad carente de todo egoísmo, y Ladislaw hace a veces de caballero andante suyo. Me tropecé con ellos el otro día en una calle poco transitada; ya sabe usted qué aspecto tiene Ladislaw: una especie de Dafnis con chaleco y chaqueta; y la diminuta solterona cogida de su brazo; parecían una pareja salida de una comedia romántica. Pero la mejor prueba de la valía de Farebrother es verlo y oírlo.

Por fortuna Dorothea estaba en su saloncito particular cuando tuvo lugar aquel diálogo, y no había nadie presente que hiciera penosa la inocente descripción que Lydgate acababa de realizar de Ladislaw.

Como era normal en él en cuestión de habladurías, el joven médico había olvidado por completo el comentario de su mujer sobre Will y la señora Casaubon. En aquel momento solo le interesaba todo lo que sirviese para recomendar a la familia Farebrother; había subrayado a propósito lo peor para anticiparse así a cualquier objeción. Durante las semanas transcurridas desde la muerte del señor Casaubon apenas había visto a Ladislaw, ni oído ningún rumor que le advirtiera de que el secretario particular del señor Brooke fuese un tema peligroso para tratarlo con la señora Casaubon. Cuando se hubo marchado, su descripción de Ladislaw siguió presente en la imaginación de Dorothea, disputando el terreno al asunto del beneficio de Lowick. ¿Qué pensaba de ella Will Ladislaw? ¿Oiría hablar de lo que hacía arder sus mejillas como nunca le había sucedido? Y ¿cómo se sentiría cuando lo oyera? Lo veía, sin embargo, con toda claridad, sonriendo a la diminuta solterona. ¡Un italiano domador de ratones blancos! Will era, por el contrario, un ser capaz de entender los sentimientos de todo el mundo y de hacer menos angustiosos los pensamientos de su prójimo en lugar de imponer los suyos con férrea determinación.

Capítulo LI

Partido también es Naturaleza, y verás
por la fuerza de la lógica cómo los dos están de acuerdo:
muchos en Uno, Uno en Muchos;
Todo no es Alguno, ni Alguno lo mismo que Cualquiera:
el género contiene a la especie, ambos son grandes o pequeños;
un género, elevadísimo; otro, nada importante;
cada especie también tiene su diferencia,
Esto no es Eso, ni Él fue nunca Tú,
aunque esto y eso son síes, y tú y él
sois como uno a uno o como tres a tres.

Las habladurías sobre el testamento del señor Casaubon no habían alcanzado aún a Ladislaw: apenas parecía haber otra cosa en el ambiente que la disolución del Parlamento y, en las elecciones ya inmediatas, como en las viejas verbenas y ferias, tampoco parecía haber otra cosa que el griterío contrapuesto de los espectáculos itinerantes; de manera que se hacía muy poco caso de otros ruidos más privados. Las famosas «elecciones secas»[117], en las que la intensidad del sentimiento público podría medirse por el bajo índice de consumo de bebidas alcohólicas, estaban a la vuelta de la esquina. Will Ladislaw era una de las personas más ocupadas en aquellos momentos; y, aunque la viudedad de Dorothea se hallaba a todas horas presente en su imaginación, estaba tan lejos de querer que se le hablara de ello que cuando Lydgate lo buscó para contarle lo que había sucedido con el beneficio de Lowick, contestó de manera bastante colérica:

—¿Por qué ha tenido usted que meterme en ese asunto? No veo nunca a la señora Casaubon, y no es probable que la vea en el futuro, puesto que vive en Freshitt. No voy nunca allí. Es territorio *tory*, donde el *Pionero* y yo somos tan bien recibidos como un cazador furtivo y su escopeta.

Lo cierto es que las susceptibilidades de Will se habían avivado al observar que el señor Brooke, en lugar de pedirle, como antes, que acudiese a Tipton Grande con más frecuencia de la que él consideraba deseable, parecía ingeniárselas para hacerle ir lo menos posible. Se trataba, por supuesto, de una concesión del señor Brooke a las indignadas protestas de sir James Chettam; y Will, atento al menor signo en aquella dirección, concluyó que se le apartaba de Tipton Grande por culpa de Dorothea. ¿Quería eso decir que sus familiares desconfiaban de él? Semejante temor carecía de justificación: estaban muy equivocados si suponían que él iba a dar un paso al frente como un aventurero menesteroso tratando de ganar el favor de una mujer rica.

Hasta ahora Will no había visto nunca con total claridad el abismo que lo separaba de Dorothea, pero se percató plenamente al tener ocasión de llegar al borde del precipicio y contemplarla al otro lado. Empezó entonces, no sin cierta cólera interior, a pensar en irse de Middlemarch: en adelante le resultaría imposible mostrar interés por la viudedad de la señora Casaubon sin exponerse a desagradables reproches… quizá incluso de la misma Dorothea, ya que tal vez otros procuraran que naciera en ella la desconfianza.

«Estamos separados para siempre —se dijo Will—. Que yo me fuese a Roma no aumentaría la distancia entre los dos». Pero lo que llamamos desesperación no es a menudo más que el anhelo doloroso de una esperanza que no encuentra dónde alimentarse. Había muchas razones para que Will no se fuera: razones públicas para que no abandonase su puesto en aquella crisis, dejando al señor Brooke en la estacada cuando necesitaba «entrenamiento» para las elecciones, y cuando había que llevar a cabo, directa o indirectamente, tanta solicitación de votos. A Will no podía gustarle abandonar la partida en el momento álgido; y cualquier candidato que apoyara la reforma, aunque su cerebro y su médula estuviesen todo lo reblandecidos que es

compatible con unos modales de caballero, podía ayudar a lograr la necesaria mayoría. Preparar al señor Brooke y mantenerlo firme en la idea de que tenía que comprometerse a votar por la ley de la reforma electoral, en lugar de insistir en su independencia y en la posibilidad de retirarse a tiempo, no era tarea fácil. La profecía del señor Farebrother de un cuarto candidato «todavía sin destapar» no había llegado a materializarse, y ni la sociedad de candidatos parlamentarios ni ningún otro grupo deseoso de asegurar una mayoría reformista veían motivos válidos que justificaran tal intervención mientras existiese un segundo candidato reformista como el señor Brooke, capaz de sufragar personalmente todos sus gastos; de manera que la lucha quedaba limitada a Pinkerton, el viejo parlamentario *tory*, a Bagster, el candidato *whig* que había ganado las últimas elecciones, y a Brooke, el futuro parlamentario independiente, que iba a comprometerse únicamente en aquella ocasión. El señor Hawley y su partido concentrarían todas sus fuerzas en la lucha por el escaño de Pinkerton, y el éxito del señor Brooke dependería de los votantes que colocaran a Bagster en segunda posición, o de la transformación de votos *tory* en votos reformistas. Esta última solución, por supuesto, sería la preferible.

La perspectiva de cambiar la orientación de los votos suponía un peligroso motivo de confusión para el señor Brooke: su idea de que los indecisos se dejarían atraer por afirmaciones vacilantes, y también su tendencia a aceptar los argumentos de la oposición cuando aparecían en su memoria, dificultaba mucho la tarea de Will Ladislaw.

—Ya sabe usted que hay tácticas en estas cosas —era el argumento del señor Brooke—; reunirse con la gente a mitad de camino… moderar las propias ideas diciendo: «bien, hay algo de cierto en eso», y todo lo demás. Estoy de acuerdo con usted en que es una ocasión singular… el país con una voluntad propia, alianzas políticas, cosas por el estilo… Pero a veces cortamos con un cuchillo demasiado afilado, Ladislaw. Esos cabezas de familia con diez libras[118], pongamos por caso: ¿por qué diez? Hay que trazar la línea en algún sitio… de acuerdo: pero ¿por qué precisamente en diez? Esa es una pregunta difícil, si se para uno a pensarlo.

—Claro que lo es —le respondía Will, impaciente—. Pero si espera usted a que consigamos una ley perfectamente lógica, tendrá que presentarse como revolucionario y entonces mucho me temo que Middlemarch no lo elegirá. En cuanto a encontrar un término medio, no es este momento para términos medios.

El señor Brooke siempre acababa por dar la razón a Ladislaw, que aún le parecía un Burke con fermento de Shelley; pero después de una pausa la prudencia de su propio método volvía a reafirmarse, empujándolo otra vez, con gran optimismo, a utilizarlo. En aquella fase del proceso electoral el señor Brooke estaba todavía de excelente humor, que no lo abandonaba siquiera después de hacer cuantiosas entregas de dinero; porque su capacidad para convencer y persuadir no se había puesto aún a prueba en nada de mayor dificultad que las palabras que pronuncia un presidente de mesa al introducir a otros oradores, o el diálogo con un votante de Middlemarch, del que salía convencido de ser un estratega por naturaleza y lamentando no haberse dedicado antes a aquellas cosas. Tenía cierta conciencia, sin embargo, de haber sufrido una derrota a manos del señor Mawmsey, un representante muy destacado en Middlemarch de ese gran poder social que es el tendero al por menor y, naturalmente, uno de los votantes más dubitativos del distrito, deseoso de abastecer con la misma calidad de té y azúcar al reformista y al antirreformista, así como de mostrarse imparcialmente de acuerdo con los dos, y convencido, como los burgueses de antaño, de que la necesidad de elegir miembros para el Parlamento era una gran carga para una ciudad: porque, si bien no había ningún peligro en dar de antemano esperanzas a todos los partidos, llegaba finalmente el penoso momento en que era preciso desengañar a personas respetables cuyos nombres figuraban en sus libros de contabilidad. El señor Mawmsey estaba acostumbrado a recibir pedidos importantes del señor Brooke de Tipton Grange; pero, por otra parte, había muchos miembros del comité de Pinkerton cuyas opiniones tenían un gran peso de comestibles a su favor. El señor Mawmsey, pensando que el señor Brooke, por no ser demasiado «rápido de entendimiento», resultaría el más dispuesto a perdonar a un tendero que votaba contra él al verse presionado, adoptó un tono confidencial en la trastienda.

—En cuanto a la reforma, señor mío, mírela desde el punto de vista de una familia —dijo, haciendo sonar el cambio que llevaba en el bolsillo y sonriendo afablemente—. ¿Mantendrá a la señora Mawmsey y le permitirá sacar adelante a seis hijos cuando yo falte? Le hago una pregunta ficticia, sabiendo cuál ha de ser la respuesta. Muy bien. Lo que sí le pregunto es qué debo hacer, como marido y padre, cuando llegan ciertos caballeros y me dicen: «Haga usted lo que guste, Mawmsey, pero si vota contra nosotros, compraré mis ultramarinos en otro sitio: cuando pongo azúcar al té me gusta sentir que hago un beneficio al país manteniendo a comerciantes que están del lado de la justicia». Exactamente esas palabras me han sido dirigidas desde la misma silla en que está usted ahora sentado. No quiero decir que fuese su honorable

persona, claro está, señor Brooke.

—No, no, no… Esa es una mentalidad muy estrecha, dese cuenta. Mientras mi mayordomo no se queje de sus artículos, señor Mawmsey —dijo el señor Brooke, con tono conciliador—; mientras no oiga que nos envía usted azúcar de mala calidad, o especias… cosas así… nunca le diré que las encargue en otro sitio.

—Señor mío, soy su humilde servidor y le quedo muy agradecido —dijo el señor Mawmsey, sintiendo que la cuestión política se aclaraba un poco—. Ha de ser sin duda un placer votar por un caballero que habla de manera tan honorable.

—A decir verdad, señor Mawmsey, descubrirá usted que ponerse de nuestro lado es lo mejor que puede hacer. Esta reforma afectará a todo el mundo a la larga… Se trata de una medida totalmente popular… de un abecé de la política que tiene que venir primero para que siga después todo lo demás. Estoy completamente de acuerdo con usted en que debe ver esta cuestión desde el punto de vista familiar, pero sin olvidar la cosa pública. Somos todos una familia, dese cuenta, se trata de una misma alacena. Un voto, pongamos por ejemplo, puede ayudar a que hagan fortuna los hombres del Cabo… No es posible decir cuáles serán los efectos de un voto —terminó el señor Brooke, con las sensación de haber perdido un poco el rumbo, pero disfrutando aún con la conversación.

El señor Mawmsey, sin embargo, le contestó en tono decididamente discrepante:

—Le ruego que me disculpe, señor mío, pero eso no me lo puedo permitir. Cuando doy mi voto, tengo que saber lo que estoy haciendo; tengo que considerar cuáles serán sus efectos sobre mi caja y sobre mi libro mayor, permítame que se lo diga con el mayor respeto. Admito que en los precios hay muchos factores imprevisibles; y se puede producir una baja repentina después de haber comprado pasas de Corinto, una mercancía que no se conserva bien… Nunca he podido prever todos los pros y los contras en esa materia, lo que es una buena lección para el orgullo humano. En cuanto a una familia, hay un deudor y un acreedor, espero; no creo que la reforma vaya a acabar con eso; de lo contrario, yo votaría para que las cosas siguieran como están. Pocas personas tienen menos necesidad que yo, hablando personalmente, es decir, en nombre mío y de mi familia, de pedir que se hagan cambios. No soy uno de esos hombres que no tienen nada que perder: me refiero a la respetabilidad tanto en la parroquia como en mi negocio, y de ningún modo en relación con usted como su proveedor, ya que ha tenido la amabilidad de decirme que lo seguiré siendo, tanto si voto por usted como si no, mientras los artículos que le mande sean satisfactorios.

Después de esta conversación, el señor Mawmsey subió a su casa y presumió ante su mujer de que Brooke, de Tipton Grange, se había encontrado con un hueso demasiado duro de roer y de que ya no le importaba tanto tener que ir a votar.

El señor Brooke se abstuvo en esta ocasión de alardear de sus tácticas ante Ladislaw, quien por su parte se contentaba con persuadirse de que la solicitación de votos no era asunto suyo, excepto desde un punto de vista puramente argumentativo, y que su instrumento de trabajo era únicamente el conocimiento. El señor Brooke, como era inevitable, tenía sus agentes, que entendían la manera de ser del votante de Middlemarch y los métodos para alistar su ignorancia del lado de la reforma electoral: métodos sorprendentemente similares a los que servían para alistarla en el bando contrario. Will se tapaba los oídos. De vez en cuando el Parlamento, como otros aspectos de nuestra vida, incluidos los relacionados con las comidas y con la manera de vestirnos, difícilmente podrían seguir adelante si nuestra imaginación se mostrara muy activa acerca de sus procesos. En el mundo había suficientes hombres con las manos sucias dispuestos a ocuparse de negocios sucios; y Will se convencía a sí mismo de que su participación en la elección del señor Brooke sería completamente limpia.

Sobre las posibilidades de éxito con aquel modo de contribuir a la mayoría favorable a la reforma, Will tenía muchas dudas. Había escrito diferentes discursos y guiones de discursos, pero empezaba a darse cuenta de que el intelecto del señor Brooke, si estaba preocupado por recordar cualquier serie de ideas, las dejaba caer, salía corriendo en su busca, y no era fácil que regresara. Reunir documentos es una manera de servir al propio país, pero recordar su contenido es otra. ¡No! La única forma en que se podía obligar al señor Brooke a recordar los argumentos correctos en el momento preciso era que trabajase con ahínco en ellos hasta que ocuparan todo el espacio disponible en su cerebro. Pero existía la dificultad de hallar sitio, dado el gran número de cosas que ya estaban allí desde antes. El mismo señor Brooke señalaba que sus ideas más bien le resultaban un estorbo cuando hablaba.

En cualquier caso, la eficacia de los esfuerzos de Ladislaw iba a ser puesta a prueba de inmediato, porque, antes de la fecha en que se nombraría a los candidatos, el señor Brooke tenía que presentarse a los respetables electores de Middlemarch desde el balcón del Ciervo Blanco, muy bien situado en una de las esquinas de la plaza del mercado, desde donde se dominaba una amplia zona de la misma plaza y las dos calles convergentes. Era una hermosa mañana de mayo, y todo parecía esperanzador: existían ciertas

posibilidades de entendimiento entre el comité de Bagster y el de Brooke, al que el señor Bulstrode, el señor Standish, como abogado liberal, y algunos fabricantes, como el señor Plymdale y el señor Vincy, daban una solidez que casi sobrepasaba a la del señor Hawley y sus asociados, que se reunían en El Dragón Verde a favor de Pinkerton. El señor Brooke, consciente de haber debilitado, gracias a sus reformas como terrateniente durante el último medio año, los trompetazos del periódico rival contra él, al oír cómo le vitoreaban algunas personas al entrar en la ciudad, sintió su corazón considerablemente aligerado bajo el chaleco de color amarillo. Pero en las ocasiones críticas sucede a menudo que todos los momentos parecen cómodamente remotos hasta el instante decisivo.

—Parece que todo va bien, ¿no es cierto? —dijo el señor Brooke mientras se iba reuniendo el gentío—. Voy a tener público abundante en cualquier caso. Y eso es una cosa que me gusta… un público así, formado por los propios vecinos, dese usted cuenta.

Los tejedores y los curtidores de Middlemarch, a diferencia del señor Mawmsey, nunca habían considerado al señor Brooke vecino suyo, y no se sentían más ligados a él que si lo hubieran mandado en una caja desde Londres. Escucharon sin mucho alboroto a los oradores que presentaron al candidato, aunque uno de ellos —un personaje político de Brassing, que había ido a explicar a Middlemarch cuál era su deber— habló de manera tan exhaustiva que resultaba alarmante pensar en lo que el candidato pudiera añadir después. Mientras tanto la multitud se había ido espesando y, a medida que el personaje político se acercaba al final de su intervención, el señor Brooke empezó a sentir un notable cambio en sus sensaciones mientras todavía manoseaba su monóculo, jugueteaba con los documentos que tenía delante e intercambiaba observaciones con los miembros de su comité, como un hombre a quien aparecer en público le resultara indiferente.

—Voy a tomarme otra copa de jerez, Ladislaw —le dijo con aire tranquilo a Will, que se hallaba detrás de él, y que en seguida le pasó la bebida supuestamente vigorizante. Fue una mala elección; porque el señor Brooke era abstemio, y beber deprisa una segunda copa de jerez, sin que hubiera pasado mucho tiempo desde que tomara la primera, resultó una sorpresa para su organismo que tuvo el efecto de desperdigar sus energías en lugar de agruparlas. Por favor, téngase compasión de él: ¡hay tantos caballeros ingleses que sufren al lanzarse a hacer discursos por motivos totalmente personales! El señor Brooke, por el contrario, quería servir a su país presentándose como candidato al Parlamento… lo que, sin duda, puede también hacerse por razones privadas pero, una vez decidido, exige, inexorablemente, pronunciar discursos.

Al señor Brooke no le preocupaba en absoluto el comienzo de su intervención; eso, estaba seguro, saldría a la perfección; no presentaría la menor dificultad, y estaría tan bien organizado como una serie de pareados de Pope. Embarcarse sería fácil, pero la visión del mar abierto que podía venir después resultaba alarmante. «Y además las preguntas —insinuó el demonio que se despertó precisamente entonces en su estómago—, alguien puede hacer preguntas sobre los artículos de la ley».

—Ladislaw —continuó en voz alta—, páseme el memorando con los datos sobre la ley.

Cuando el señor Brooke se presentó en el balcón, los vítores fueron lo bastante nutridos para contrarrestar los gritos, gruñidos, rebuznos y otras expresiones de doctrinas adversas; aquellas manifestaciones resultaron sin embargo tan moderadas que el señor Standish (perro viejo sin duda alguna) musitó en el oído más próximo:

—Esto me da muy mala espina. Seguro que Hawley tiene preparado algo más contundente.

Los vítores, de todas formas, resultaban estimulantes y ningún candidato hubiera podido tener un aspecto más afable que el señor Brooke, con el memorando en el bolsillo del pecho, la mano izquierda en la barandilla del balcón y la derecha jugueteando con el monóculo. Los rasgos más notables de su figura eran el chaleco amarillo, los cabellos rubios muy recortados y su fisonomía de aspecto neutral. El futuro candidato empezó con bastante confianza.

—¡Caballeros…! ¡Electores de Middlemarch!

Aquello era tan apropiado que parecía lógico hacer una pequeña pausa.

—Estoy muy contento de encontrarme aquí… Nunca me he sentido tan orgulloso y feliz en mi vida… nunca, dense ustedes cuenta.

Aquella era una audaz forma de expresión, pero no exactamente la más indicada; porque, desgraciadamente, incluso el familiar comienzo se había escabullido… Hasta los pareados de Pope pueden no ser más que derrumbamientos, desapariciones, cuando el miedo nos atenaza y una copa de jerez se pasea con la velocidad del humo entre nuestras ideas. Ladislaw, de pie junto a la ventana detrás del orador, pensó: «Todo se ha venido abajo. Puesto que lo mejor no siempre da resultado, la única posibilidad es que, por una vez, perder el hilo sea la mejor respuesta». El señor Brooke, mientras tanto, al olvidar otros puntos básicos de su intervención, echó mano de sí mismo y de sus méritos, un tema siempre apropiado y elegante

para un candidato.

—Vivo muy cerca de todos ustedes, mis buenos amigos… Me han conocido como magistrado durante bastante tiempo… Siempre me he interesado por los problemas públicos… maquinaria, por ejemplo, y las campañas para acabar con las máquinas… A muchos de ustedes les atañe el asunto de la maquinaria, y últimamente he estado ocupándome de eso. No servirá de nada, dense cuenta, destruir las máquinas: todo debe seguir adelante… comercio, industria, negocios, intercambio de materias primas… ese tipo de cosas… Desde Adam Smith todo eso ha de seguir adelante. Tenemos que ver el mundo en toda su extensión: «Observación con amplias perspectivas», hemos de mirar a todas partes, «desde China hasta Perú», como dice alguien… Johnson, creo, *The Rambler*[119], si no estoy equivocado. Eso es lo que yo he hecho hasta cierto punto… No he llegado hasta el Perú; pero no siempre me he quedado en casa… Comprendí que no habría estado bien. He recorrido el Cercano Oriente, adonde llegan algunos de los productos de Middlemarch… y también, por otra parte, he visitado el Báltico. El Báltico, por ejemplo.

Haciendo uso así de sus recuerdos, el señor Brooke podría haber seguido adelante y hasta haber regresado de los mares más remotos sin el menor escollo; pero el enemigo había preparado una diabólica estratagema. Por encima de los hombros de la multitud, casi enfrente del señor Brooke y a unos diez metros de distancia, apareció una imagen suya: chaleco de color amarillo, monóculo y fisonomía de aspecto neutral, pintada sobre trapos; y, al mismo tiempo, surgido al parecer del aire mismo, como el canto de un cuclillo, se pudo oír un eco de sus palabras con entonación de teatro de títeres. Todo el mundo alzó la mirada hacia las ventanas de las casas de las esquinas; pero o bien estaban vacías o llenas de espectadores regocijados. El eco más inocente se convierte en burla cuando repite las palabras de un orador solemne, y aquel eco no tenía nada de inocente; además de no repetir con la precisión de un eco natural, elegía perversamente las palabras que utilizaba. Cuando dijo: «El Báltico, por ejemplo», las risas que iban de aquí para allá por el público se transformaron en carcajada general y, de no haber sido por la carga de seriedad que suponía —debido a la maraña de las circunstancias— la identificación del partido y de la gran causa pública con «Brooke de Tipton», es posible que el mismo comité hubiera llegado a contagiarse. El señor Bulstrode preguntó, con tono de censura, qué estaba haciendo la nueva policía; pero no era fácil capturar a una voz, y un ataque a la efigie del candidato hubiese resultado equívoco, porque Hawley tenía probablemente intención de que se la utilizara como blanco.

El mismo señor Brooke no se hallaba en condiciones de advertir nada con rapidez excepto una general desbandada de ideas dentro de la cabeza: percibía incluso un ligero zumbido en los oídos, y era la única persona que no se había dado cuenta con claridad ni del eco ni de la presencia de su efigie entre el gentío. Pocas cosas limitan tanto la amplitud de nuestras percepciones como la preocupación por lo que tenemos que decir. El señor Brooke oyó las risas; pero ya contaba con algún esfuerzo *tory* por crear un alboroto, y a eso se añadía en aquel momento la agitación adicional causada por la agradable sensación de que su preámbulo perdido estaba de regreso para sacarlo del Báltico.

—Eso me recuerda —continuó, metiendo una mano en el bolsillo con aire desenvuelto— que, si necesitara un precedente, aunque nunca se necesite un precedente para hacer lo que debe hacerse, dense cuenta… De todas formas ahí está Chatham, por ejemplo; no puedo decir que hubiese apoyado a Chatham, o a Pitt, el joven… Y es que no era un hombre de ideas, y necesitamos ideas, dense cuenta.

—¡Al cuerno con sus ideas! Queremos la ley —dijo una voz potente y áspera desde la multitud abajo en la calle.

Inmediatamente, la voz del invisible títere, que había seguido hasta entonces al señor Brooke, repitió: «¡Al cuerno con sus ideas! Queremos la ley». La carcajada fue mayor que nunca, y por primera vez el señor Brooke, que estaba callado, oyó con toda claridad el eco burlón. Parecía ridiculizar a la persona que le había interrumpido, y desde ese punto de vista resultaba alentador; de manera que replicó con gran afabilidad:

—Hay algo de cierto en lo que usted dice, mi buen amigo, y ¿para qué nos reunimos si no es para decir lo que pensamos?… Libertad de opinión, libertad de prensa, libertad… ese tipo de cosas. La ley, veamos… Tendrán ustedes la ley. —Aquí el señor Brooke hizo una pausa para ajustarse el monóculo y sacar el papel del bolsillo del pecho, con la sensación de mostrarse práctico y de descender a detalles. Pero la voz invisible continuó:

—Tendrá usted la ley, señor Brooke, por debate preelectoral, y un asiento fuera del Parlamento a pagar contra reembolso, cinco mil libras, siete chelines y cuatro peniques.

El señor Brooke, entre el estrépito de las carcajadas, se puso colorado, dejó caer el monóculo y, al mirar a su alrededor, desconcertado, contempló su propia imagen, que se había acercado más. Un momento después la vio dolorosamente manchada por el impacto de los huevos. Su ánimo se enardeció un tanto y

alzó la voz:

—Bufonadas, jugarretas, ridiculizar la verdad… todo eso está muy bien. —Aquí un desagradable huevo se estrelló en el hombro del señor Brooke, al mismo tiempo que el eco decía: «Todo eso está muy bien»; a continuación llovieron los huevos, en su mayor parte dirigidos a la efigie, pero alcanzando de vez en cuando al Brooke de carne y hueso como por casualidad. Apareció una corriente de nuevos espectadores empujando entre la multitud; pitos, alaridos, aullidos y pífanos resultaban aún más ruidosos por los gritos y los forcejeos para acallarlos. Ninguna voz habría tenido la potencia necesaria para elevarse por encima del tumulto, y el pobre señor Brooke, desagradablemente ungido, no resistió más tiempo. El desastre habría sido más llevadero si hubiera tenido unas características menos retozonas y juveniles: una utilización más contundente de la fuerza (con lo que cualquier informador periodístico habría podido afirmar que «corrieron peligro las costillas del culto orador» o dar respetuosamente testimonio de que «las suelas de las botas del orador eran visibles por encima de la barandilla») comporta mayores consuelos a quien la padece.

El señor Brooke regresó a la habitación del comité diciendo, lo más despreocupadamente que pudo:

—Es una verdadera lástima, ya lo ven ustedes. A la larga habría conseguido que me escucharan… pero no me han dado tiempo. Un poco más adelante habría hablado de la ley —dijo, mirando a Ladislaw—. Ya verán, sin embargo, cómo todo sale bien en el nombramiento de candidatos.

Pero no hubo unanimidad en cuanto a que las cosas fueran a salir bien; por el contrario, el comité parecía más bien ceñudo, y el personaje político de Brassing escribía con diligencia, como si estuviera urdiendo nuevas estratagemas.

—Ha sido Bowyer el responsable —dijo el señor Standish, para no comprometerse—. Estoy tan seguro como si lo hubieran anunciado. Es un ventrílocuo excelente, y lo ha hecho muy bien, ¡qué caramba! Hawley lo ha invitado varias veces a cenar últimamente; ese Bowyer tiene mucho talento.

—Usted nunca me ha hablado de él, Standish; de lo contrario lo habría invitado a cenar —protestó el pobre señor Brooke, que había practicado como nunca la hospitalidad por el bien de su país.

—No hay persona más despreciable en Middlemarch que Bowyer —dijo Ladislaw, rebosante de indignación—, pero parece como si los individuos despreciables fueran siempre los que deciden de qué lado se inclina la balanza.

Will estaba muy enfadado consigo mismo y con su «jefe» y fue a encerrarse en su alojamiento, prácticamente decidido a abandonar el *Pionero* y al señor Brooke. ¿Para qué quedarse? Si el infranqueable abismo que lo separaba de Dorothea llegaba a desaparecer alguna vez, sería gracias a que él se marchara y consiguiese otro puesto completamente distinto y no a que se quedara allí y se convirtiera en objeto de merecido desprecio como subordinado de Brooke. A continuación se presentó ante él su sueño juvenil de los milagros que podría hacer… en cinco años, por ejemplo; los escritos políticos, los discursos alcanzarían mayor valor ahora que la vida pública iba a tener más amplios horizontes y a ser más nacional, y aquellas actividades podrían darle tanto prestigio que no sería ya como pedirle a Dorothea que descendiera para ponerse a su altura. Cinco años: si pudiera estar seguro de que ella se interesaba por él más que por otros; si pudiera tan solo hacerle comprender que se mantendría alejado hasta que pudiera declararle su amor sin rebajarse… se marcharía esperanzado, para iniciar una carrera que, según el orden lógico de las cosas, no parecía descabellado intentar con solo veinticinco años, ya que el talento trae la fama, y la fama todo lo que la vida tiene de más agradable. Will era capaz de hablar y de escribir; podía llegar a dominar cualquier materia que eligiese, y estaba decidido a ponerse siempre del lado de la razón y de la justicia, tarea a la que consagraría todo su entusiasmo. ¿Por qué no iba a verse algún día alzado sobre los hombros de la multitud y a sentir que se había hecho justamente merecedor de aquella distinción? Sin duda alguna abandonaría Middlemarch, iría a Londres y se prepararía para la celebridad estudiando Derecho.

Pero no de inmediato: antes tenía que producirse una comunicación de algún tipo entre Dorothea y él. No podía darse por satisfecho hasta que la señora Casaubon supiera por qué le era imposible contraer matrimonio, aunque fuera él el hombre que ella eligiera para casarse. De aquí que necesitara conservar su puesto y soportar al señor Brooke un poco más.

Muy pronto, sin embargo, tuvo motivos para sospechar que el señor Brooke se le había anticipado en el deseo de poner fin a su asociación. Delegaciones de destacados ciudadanos y voces internas habían logrado persuadir a aquel filántropo para que tomara una medida más enérgica de lo corriente por el bien de la humanidad; habían logrado convencerlo, en concreto, para que se retirara en favor de otro candidato, al que cedería los recursos de su organización electoral. Él mismo lo calificaba de medida enérgica, haciendo notar, además, que su salud no era tan capaz de soportar la agitación como él había imaginado.

—Me he sentido un poco incómodo por culpa del pecho… No sería conveniente llevar este asunto demasiado lejos —le comunicó a Ladislaw al explicarle su situación—. He de detenerme. El pobre Casaubon

fue un aviso, dese cuenta. Tuve que adelantar cantidades importantes, pero también es cierto que se ha logrado abrir brecha. Es un trabajo duro hacer campaña electoral, ¿no es cierto, Ladislaw? No me extrañaría que estuviera usted cansado. Sin embargo, hemos abierto brecha con el *Pionero*… Hemos puesto las cosas en marcha y todo eso. Alguien menos brillante que usted podría ocuparse ahora del periódico… menos brillante, dese cuenta.

—¿Quiere que lo deje? —preguntó Will, enrojeciendo muy deprisa, mientras se alzaba del escritorio y avanzaba tres pasos con las manos en los bolsillos—. Estoy dispuesto a hacerlo cuando usted lo desee.

—En cuanto a desear, mi querido Ladislaw, tengo la mejor de las opiniones sobre su capacidad, ya lo sabe. Pero he mantenido consultas acerca del *Pionero* con personas de nuestras mismas convicciones y se inclinan a tomarlo en sus manos (indemnizándome hasta cierto punto), a hacerse cargo, de hecho. Y, dadas las circunstancias, quizá prefiera usted renunciar… Puede que encuentre mejores oportunidades. Esas otras personas quizá no tengan la gran opinión que yo he tenido siempre de usted, como si fuera mi *alter ego*, mi mano derecha… aunque siempre acariciase la esperanza de que llegara usted a hacer algo de mayor trascendencia. Quizá me vaya a Francia una temporada. Pero le escribiré todas las cartas que quiera, ya sabe usted, para Althorpe[120] y otras personas por el estilo. A Althorpe lo conozco.

—Le estoy extraordinariamente agradecido —dijo Ladislaw con altivez—. Puesto que va usted a dejar el *Pionero*, no es necesario que yo le moleste con los pasos que vaya a dar en el futuro. Quizá decida continuar aquí por el momento.

Cuando el señor Brooke lo dejó, Will se dijo a sí mismo: «El resto de la familia le ha estado insistiendo para que se libre de mí, y ahora ya no le importa que me vaya. Me quedaré todo el tiempo que me plazca. Me iré por decisión propia y no porque me tengan miedo».

Capítulo LII

Su corazón
aceptó los deberes más humildes.

WORDSWORTH

La tarde de junio en que el señor Farebrother supo que recibiría el beneficio de Lowick hubo gran alegría en el salón de la vicaría e incluso los retratos de los grandes abogados parecieron contemplar el mundo con satisfacción. La madre del vicario no probó ni el té ni las tostadas, pero se mantuvo erguida con su habitual decoro, manifestando su emoción tan solo con ese rubor en las mejillas y ese brillo en los ojos que proporcionan a cualquier anciana cierta conmovedora y momentánea identidad con su yo juvenil ya tan lejano.

—El mayor consuelo, Camden —dijo la señora Farebrother con gran energía—, es que te lo has merecido.

—Cuando uno encuentra buen acomodo, madre, la mitad de los méritos han de venir después —dijo el vicario, rebosante de alegría, y sin hacer esfuerzos por ocultarlo. El júbilo que reflejaba su rostro era una alegría activa, con energía suficiente no solo para manifestarse en brillo exterior, sino para iluminar además atareadas visiones interiores; junto con la satisfacción, se veían también ideas en sus ojos—. Vamos a ver, tía —continuó el señor Farebrother, frotándose las manos y mirando a la señorita Noble, que estaba haciendo tiernos ruiditos como de roedor—, habrá siempre terrones de azúcar sobre la mesa para que los robes y se los des a los niños; y tendrás muchísimas medias nuevas para regalar y podrás continuar zurciéndote las tuyas.

La señorita Noble asintió con la cabeza a las palabras de su sobrino, reprimiendo solo a medias una risa algo temerosa, porque ya había dejado caer en su cesto un terrón adicional de azúcar, estimulada por la nueva situación del señor Farebrother.

—En cuanto a ti, Winny —continuó el vicario—, no pondré obstáculo a que te cases con cualquier soltero de Middlemarch… El señor Solomon Featherstone, por ejemplo, tan pronto como descubra que estás enamorada de él.

La señorita Winifred, que miraba a su hermano todo el tiempo y lloraba copiosamente, que era su manera de alegrarse, sonrió entre las lágrimas y dijo:

—Eres tú quien tiene que dar ejemplo: has de casarte ahora.

—Estoy totalmente de acuerdo. Pero ¿quién me quiere a mí? No soy más que un viejo desastrado —dijo el vicario, poniéndose en pie, alejando la silla y mirándose—. ¿Tú qué opinas, madre?

—Eres un hombre bien parecido, Camden, aunque no tengas tan buena figura como tu padre —dijo la anciana señora.

—Me gustaría que te casaras con la señorita Garth, hermano —dijo la señorita Winifred—. Esa muchacha alegraría mucho nuestra vida en Lowick.

—¡Estupendo! Hablas como si las jóvenes estuvieran atadas esperando que alguien las eligiera, como las aves de corral en el mercado; como si no tuviera más que declararme para que todo el mundo me aceptara —dijo el vicario, poco deseoso de concretar más.

—No queremos a todo el mundo —dijo la señorita Winifred—. Pero a ti te gustaría la señorita Garth, ¿no es cierto, madre?

—La elección que haga mi hijo siempre me parecerá bien —dijo la señora Farebrother con majestuosa discreción—, y tu futura esposa sería muy bien recibida, Camden. Querrás jugar al *whist* en casa cuando vayamos a Lowick, y Henrietta Noble nunca ha sabido. (La señora Farebrother siempre utilizaba aquel magnífico nombre para hablar de su diminuta y anciana hermana).

—Ya no jugaré más al *whist*, madre.

—¿Por qué no, Camden? En mis tiempos se consideraba una excelente distracción para un buen eclesiástico —dijo la señora Farebrother, ignorante del significado que el *whist* tenía para su hijo, y hablando con tono cortante, como si alguien tratara de apoyar, con evidente peligro, una nueva doctrina.

—Estaré demasiado ocupado para jugar a las cartas, porque voy a tener dos parroquias a mi cargo —dijo el vicario, prefiriendo no discutir las virtudes de los naipes.

Ya le había dicho a Dorothea:

—No me siento obligado a renunciar a St Botolph. Será suficiente protesta contra la pluralidad de cargos que dé la mayor parte del dinero a otra persona. Lo mejor no es renunciar al poder, sino usarlo bien.

—Yo también he pensado en eso —dijo Dorothea—. Por lo que a mí se refiere, creo que me sería más fácil renunciar al poder y al dinero que conservarlos. Me parece muy poco adecuado que yo tenga este patronazgo, pero considero que no debo permitir que haga uso de él otra persona.

—Soy yo quien está obligado a comportarse de manera que no lamente usted su decisión —dijo el señor Farebrother.

El suyo era uno de esos caracteres en los que la conciencia se vuelve más exigente cuando el yugo de la vida deja de pesarles. El vicario no hizo ninguna manifestación de humildad, pero en lo hondo de su corazón se avergonzaba bastante de que hubiese en su conducta negligencias de las que estaban libres otros que no recibían beneficios.

—Solía desear con frecuencia no haber sido clérigo —le dijo a Lydgate—, pero quizá la solución sea que trate de hacerlo lo mejor posible. Ya comprende que ese es el punto de vista del que disfruta de un buen beneficio, con lo que las dificultades se reducen mucho —concluyó, sonriendo.

El vicario tenía por entonces la impresión de que sus nuevos deberes no serían difíciles. Pero el deber tiene la virtud de comportarse inesperadamente: es algo así como un amigo corpulento a quien invitamos amablemente a visitarnos y se rompe una pierna en nuestra propiedad.

Apenas transcurrida una semana, el deber se presentó en el estudio del señor Farebrother disfrazado de Fred Vincy, que acababa de volver de Omnibus College con su título de licenciado.

—Me da vergüenza molestarlo, señor Farebrother —dijo Fred, cuyo rostro bien parecido y sincero inclinaba a la benignidad—, pero es el único amigo al que puedo consultar. Ya se lo conté todo una vez y fue usted tan amable que no he podido por menos de venir a verlo.

—Siéntate, Fred; te escucharé y haré todo lo que pueda —dijo el vicario, que se ocupaba empaquetando algunos objetos de poco tamaño para hacer la mudanza y que continuó con su trabajo.

—Quería decirle… —Fred vaciló un instante y luego continuó como quien se arroja al mar de cabeza— que ahora estoy en condiciones de entrar en la Iglesia; y de hecho, mire donde mire, no veo que pueda hacer otra cosa. No me gusta, pero me doy cuenta de que es muy duro para mi padre que yo diga eso, después de que se ha gastado tanto dinero educándome para ello —Fred hizo otra breve pausa y luego repitió—: y no veo que pueda hacer otra cosa.

—Hablé con tu padre de ese asunto, Fred, pero no conseguí nada. Dijo que era demasiado tarde. De todos modos ya has superado un obstáculo; ¿cuáles son las otras dificultades?

—Simplemente que no me gusta. No me gusta la teología, ni predicar, ni estar obligado a tener aspecto serio. No es que quiera ser una mala persona; pero no siento la menor inclinación hacia las cosas que la gente espera de un clérigo. Y, sin embargo, ¿qué otra cosa puedo hacer? Mi padre no dispone de capital sobrante; de lo contrario quizá me dedicase a la agricultura. Tampoco tiene sitio para mí en su negocio. Y, por supuesto, no puedo ponerme ahora a estudiar Derecho o Medicina, cuando mi padre quiere que empiece a ganar algún dinero. Está muy bien decir que me equivoco si entro en la Iglesia, pero lo mismo podrían sugerirme que me fuese a un desierto.

La voz de Fred había adquirido un tono de malhumorada protesta y el señor Farebrother se habría sentido inclinado a sonreír si su pensamiento no estuviera muy ocupado imaginándose más de lo que Fred le decía.

—¿Es que tienes alguna dificultad sobre la doctrina… sobre los artículos de la fe? —dijo, tratando de plantearse el problema con todo el rigor posible, por consideración a Fred.

—No; supongo que los artículos están bien. Carezco de razones personales para oponerme a ellos y, lo que es aún más importante, personas mucho más inteligentes que yo los aceptan sin dificultad. Creo que

sería más bien ridículo recurrir a escrúpulos de ese tipo, como si yo estuviera capacitado para emitir un juicio —dijo Fred, con gran sencillez.

—Imagino, entonces, que se te habrá ocurrido que podrías ser un párroco aceptable aunque no llegaras a destacar como teólogo.

—Claro está que si me veo obligado a ser clérigo, procuraré cumplir con mi deber, aunque no me guste. ¿Cree usted que alguien podría condenarme?

—¿Por entrar en la Iglesia en esas circunstancias? Eso depende de tu conciencia, Fred, de hasta qué punto hayas calculado el costo y hayas visto lo que va a exigirte ese trabajo. Solo puedo hablarte de mí mismo, porque nunca he sido demasiado estricto y eso me ha causado intranquilidad a veces.

—Hay otro obstáculo —dijo Fred, ruborizándose—. No se lo conté anteriormente, aunque quizá dijera cosas que le hayan hecho imaginárselo. Hay alguien a quien tengo mucho cariño: he estado enamorado de ella desde que éramos niños.

—La señorita Garth, supongo… —dijo el vicario, examinando muy de cerca algunos rótulos.

—Sí. Nada me parecería mal si aceptara casarse conmigo. Y sé que con ella podría ser un hombre de bien.

—¿Y crees que comparte esos sentimientos?

—Nunca lo confesará; ya hace tiempo me hizo prometer no volver a hablarle de ello. Y especialmente está en contra de que yo sea clérigo; eso lo sé muy bien. Pero no puedo renunciar a Mary. Estoy convencido de que me tiene afecto. Anoche vi a su madre y me dijo que estaba en la rectoría de Lowick con la señorita Farebrother.

—Sí, ha tenido la amabilidad de ofrecerse a ayudar a mi hermana. ¿Quieres ir a verla?

—No; lo que deseo es pedirle a usted un gran favor. Me da vergüenza abusar de esta forma; pero quizá Mary escuche lo que usted le diga, si habla con ella de este asunto… es decir, de mi entrada en la Iglesia.

—Es una tarea muy delicada, mi querido Fred. Tendría que dar por supuesto tu cariño por ella; y abordar el tema como deseas equivaldría a pedirle que me diga si te corresponde.

—Eso es lo que quiero —replicó Fred, de forma contundente—. No voy a saber qué hacer, a no ser que descubra cuáles son sus sentimientos.

—¿Quieres decir que te vas a guiar por eso a la hora de decidir sobre tu entrada en la Iglesia?

—Si Mary dice que no me aceptará en ningún caso, lo mismo da equivocarme de una manera que de otra.

—Eso es absurdo, Fred. Los hombres sobreviven a su amor, pero no superan las consecuencias de su imprudencia.

—No si se trata de un amor como el mío: no recuerdo un momento de mi vida en que no haya querido a Mary. Si tuviera que renunciar a ella, sería como empezar a vivir con piernas de madera.

—¿No le ofenderá mi intromisión?

—No, estoy seguro de que no. A usted le respeta más que a ninguna otra persona y no será capaz de evadirse con un comentario en broma, como hace conmigo. Por supuesto, yo tampoco podría haberle contado esto a nadie más, ni le pediría que hablara con ella a alguien que no fuese usted. No hay nadie que sea tan amigo de los dos. —Fred hizo una pausa y luego añadió con tono más bien quejoso—: Y Mary debería reconocer que he trabajado para aprobar los exámenes. Y creer que soy capaz de esforzarme por ella.

Hubo unos momentos de silencio antes de que el señor Farebrother dejara de trabajar y, estrechando la mano de Fred, le dijera:

—De acuerdo, muchacho. Haré lo que me pides.

Aquel mismo día el señor Farebrother fue a la rectoría de Lowick en la jaca que acababa de adquirir. «Decididamente —pensó—, soy un tallo viejo; los brotes nuevos me echan a un lado».

El vicario encontró a Mary en el jardín cortando rosas y extendiendo los pétalos sobre una sábana. El sol estaba ya muy bajo y los árboles altos cruzaban con sus sombras los senderos cubiertos de hierba por donde Mary se movía sin sombrero ni sombrilla. La señorita Garth no se había dado cuenta de que el señor Farebrother se acercaba a campo través, y acababa de agacharse para reñir a un pequeño terrier de color negro y canela que se empeñaba en andar sobre la sábana y oler los pétalos de rosa a medida que ella los iba extendiendo. La muchacha le cogió las patas delanteras con una mano y alzó el dedo índice de la otra, mientras el perro arrugaba las cejas y parecía confundido.

—Fly, Fly, me avergüenzo de ti —le dijo Mary con voz más bien grave—. Esto no es propio de un perro razonable; cualquiera pensaría que eres uno de esos estúpidos caballeritos.

—No tiene usted compasión de los jóvenes, señorita Garth —dijo el vicario desde unos dos metros de

distancia.

Mary se incorporó ruborizándose.

—Siempre da buen resultado razonar con Fly —dijo, riéndose.

—¿Pero no con caballeros jóvenes?

—Sí, claro, supongo que con algunos; puesto que los hay que se convierten en hombres excelentes.

—Me alegro de que lo reconozca, porque en este preciso momento quiero que se interese por un joven.

—Espero que no sea uno de los estúpidos —dijo Mary, empezando de nuevo a arrancar rosas y sintiendo que le latía el corazón de manera desagradable.

—No; aunque quizá la prudencia no sea su punto fuerte, sino más bien la perseverancia en los afectos y la sinceridad. La prudencia, sin embargo, está más ligada a esas dos cualidades de lo que la gente tiende a imaginar. Espero que con esas señas sepa ya de quién se trata.

—Sí, creo que sí —dijo Mary, con mucha presencia de ánimo, mientras su rostro adquiría una expresión más seria y las manos se le quedaban más frías—; imagino que de Fred Vincy.

—Me ha pedido que le consulte a usted sobre su posible ordenación. Espero que no considere que me he tomado excesivas libertades al prometerle que así lo haría.

—Por el contrario, señor Farebrother —dijo Mary, renunciando a las rosas y cruzando los brazos, pero sin atreverse a levantar la vista—; siempre que tiene usted algo que decirme me siento muy honrada.

—Antes de que entremos en ese asunto, déjeme que toque un punto del que me informó su padre de manera confidencial; fue, por cierto, la misma tarde en que cumplí otra misión que Fred, nada más volver a la universidad, me había encargado. El señor Garth me contó lo que sucedió la noche de la muerte de Featherstone… cómo usted se negó a quemar el testamento; y también me dijo que sentía usted cierto remordimiento en ese asunto, por haber sido, sin quererlo, causa de que Fred no recibiera sus diez mil libras. No me he olvidado de ello y he oído algo que quizá sirva para quitarle un peso de encima… que quizá la convenza de que no necesita hacer penitencia por ese pecado.

El señor Farebrother hizo una pausa y miró a Mary. Estaba decidido a darle a Fred todas las ventajas, pero no estaría de más, pensaba, alejar del pensamiento de la señorita Garth cualquiera de las supersticiones por las que las mujeres se guían a veces cuando le hacen a un hombre el pésimo servicio de casarse con él convirtiendo el matrimonio en acto de reparación. Las mejillas de Mary habían empezado a arder un poco, pero no dijo una sola palabra.

—Me refiero a que su acción no cambió nada para Fred. He sabido que el primer testamento no hubiese sido válido después de quemar el último; no habría sido posible legalizarlo en caso de impugnación, y esté usted segura de que habría sido impugnado. De manera que, por esa parte, puede estar totalmente tranquila.

—Muchas gracias, señor Farebrother —dijo Mary con gran seriedad—. Le estoy muy reconocida por acordarse de mis sentimientos.

—Bien; ahora puedo seguir. Fred, como ya sabe usted, aprobó los exámenes. Ha hecho lo que estaba en su mano hasta este momento, pero ahora le preocupa lo que tiene que hacer en el futuro. El problema es tan difícil que se siente inclinado a seguir los deseos de su padre y entrar en la Iglesia, aunque usted sabe mejor que yo que estaba por completo en contra de ello. Le he interrogado al respecto y confieso que no veo ninguna objeción insuperable para que se haga clérigo, tal como están las cosas. Fred dice que estaría dispuesto a intentar hacerlo lo mejor posible con una sola condición. Si esa condición se viera satisfecha, yo haría todo lo que estuviera en mi mano por ayudarlo a salir adelante. Al cabo de algún tiempo (no, por supuesto, al empezar) podría venir conmigo en calidad de vicario y tendría trabajo suficiente para que sus estipendios fueran casi los mismos que yo recibía cuando ocupaba ese puesto. Pero repito que existe una condición, sin la que todo eso no puede llegar a producirse. Fred me ha abierto su corazón, señorita Garth, y me ha pedido que interceda por él. La condición está enteramente ligada a lo que usted sienta por él. —Mary parecía tan conmovida, que el señor Farebrother dijo al cabo de un momento—: Caminemos un poco —y cuando se pusieron en marcha, añadió—: Hablando con toda claridad, Fred no quiere avanzar por ningún camino que disminuya las posibilidades de que usted acepte ser su esposa; pero, en caso contrario, tratará de hacerlo lo mejor posible en cualquier ocupación que usted apruebe.

—No me es posible prometer que vaya a ser su esposa, señor Farebrother; pero sí es seguro que nunca lo seré si se hace clérigo. Las palabras de usted están llenas de afecto y generosidad; no es en absoluto mi intención decir que esté equivocado. Tan solo que tengo una manera infantil y un tanto burlona de mirar las cosas —dijo Mary, añadiendo una chispa de travesura que sirvió para dar mayor encanto a su modestia.

—Fred desea que le informe con exactitud de lo que piensa usted —dijo el señor Farebrother.

—No podría amar a un hombre ridículo —dijo Mary, prefiriendo no profundizar más—. Fred tiene

sentido común y conocimientos suficientes para convertirse en una persona respetable, si así lo decide, en alguna ocupación secular, pero cuando me lo imagino predicando y exhortando y dando bendiciones y rezando junto a los enfermos tengo la impresión de estar mirando una caricatura. Si Fred entra en la Iglesia lo hará tan solo por razones de posición social y creo que no hay nada tan despreciable como la posición social con un fundamento tan estúpido. Esa era mi opinión del señor Crowse, con su rostro inexpresivo, su paraguas tan pulcro y su manera remilgada de hablar. ¿Qué derecho tienen hombres así a representar al cristianismo? La Iglesia no es una institución para proporcionar a los idiotas una posición social más elevada… no es… —Mary se contuvo. Se había dejado llevar como si estuviera hablando con Fred en lugar de hacerlo con el señor Farebrother.

—Las jóvenes son muy severas; no sienten el apremio de la acción como los hombres, aunque en eso quizá tenga que hacer una excepción con usted. Pero imagino que no coloca a Fred Vincy en ese nivel tan bajo.

—No, desde luego; Fred tiene suficiente sentido común, pero no creo que pudiera utilizarlo si se hiciera clérigo. Tendría que llevar siempre la máscara de su profesión.

—En ese caso la respuesta está muy clara. Como clérigo no tendría la menor esperanza.

Mary lo reconoció con un movimiento de cabeza.

—Pero si se enfrentara con todas las dificultades de ganarse la vida de otra manera… ¿le ofrecería usted el apoyo de la esperanza? ¿Puede contar con que lo acepte usted a la larga?

—Creo que Fred no necesita que le repita lo que ya le he dicho otras veces —respondió Mary, con tono levemente resentido—. Me refiero a que no debería hacer esas preguntas hasta que no haya hecho algo que merezca la pena, en lugar de asegurar que es capaz de hacerlo.

El señor Farebrother guardó silencio durante un minuto o más y luego, al dar la vuelta y detenerse bajo la sombra de un arce al final de un sendero cubierto de hierba, dijo:

—Comprendo que no quiera usted encadenarse, pero o bien sus sentimientos por Fred Vincy excluyen la posibilidad de otros afectos o no la excluyen: o bien puede contar con que usted siga soltera hasta que él haya merecido su mano o bien ha de aceptar la posibilidad de perderla aunque cumpla con todos los requisitos. Perdóneme, Mary (ya sabe que la llamaba así cuando era mi alumna en la catequesis), pero si la situación sentimental de una mujer afecta a la felicidad de otra vida… de más de una vida… creo que sería más noble por su parte hablar con plena sinceridad.

Mary también se quedó callada, sorprendida no por el comportamiento del señor Farebrother, sino por su tono, ya que sus palabras habían estado llenas de contenida emoción. Cuando cruzó por su cabeza la extraña idea de que quizá estuviera hablando de sí mismo, le pareció increíble, y se avergonzó de aquel pensamiento. A Mary nunca se le había ocurrido que pudiera amarla alguien distinto de Fred, que se había prometido con ella, cuando Mary llevaba aún calcetines y sandalias, con la anilla de un paraguas; y todavía menos que pudiera significar algo para el señor Farebrother, el hombre más inteligente de su pequeño círculo de conocidos. Solo tuvo tiempo de pensar que todo aquello era muy vago y tal vez ilusorio; pero una cosa fue clara y decidida: su respuesta.

—Ya que usted lo considera mi deber, señor Farebrother, le diré que mis sentimientos por Fred son tan intensos que no renunciaría a él por ninguna otra persona. Nunca sería del todo feliz si pensara que él era desgraciado por haberme perdido. ¡Ha echado unas raíces tan hondas dentro de mí… la gratitud que me inspira desde que éramos muy pequeños por haberme preferido siempre y por preocuparse tanto de si yo me hacía daño! No me imagino ningún nuevo sentimiento que debilite mi afecto. Lo que más deseo en este mundo es verlo hacerse digno del respeto de todos. Pero, por favor, dígale que no le prometeré nada hasta entonces; haría avergonzarse y sufrir a mi padre y a mi madre. Es libre de elegir a otra persona.

—En ese caso, no hay duda de que he llevado a buen término mi misión —dijo el señor Farebrother, ofreciéndole la mano a Mary—, y volveré en seguida a Middlemarch. Con esta perspectiva por delante, conseguiremos de alguna forma encontrar el sitio adecuado para Fred y espero vivir para unir vuestras manos. ¡Que Dios os bendiga!

—Por favor, no se vaya y déjeme que le ofrezca un poco de té —dijo Mary. Sus ojos se llenaron de lágrimas por algo indefinible, algo como la firme voluntad por parte del señor Farebrother de ocultar un dolor, algo que la hizo sentirse de pronto muy desgraciada, como le sucedió en cierta ocasión cuando vio que a su padre le temblaban las manos en un momento de angustia.

—No, querida, no. Tengo que regresar.

Al cabo de tres minutos el vicario estaba de nuevo a caballo, después de haber cumplido magnánimamente con un deber mucho más arduo que renunciar al *whist* o incluso que redactar sermones penitenciales.

Capítulo LIII

> Es una precipitación injusta deducir insinceridad de lo que los extraños llaman incoherencia: colocar un mecanismo muerto de «si…» y de «por consiguiente» en lugar de las innumerables sanguijuelas ocultas que viven allí donde creencia y conducta mantienen relaciones de mutuo apoyo.

El señor Bulstrode, cuando tenía esperanzas de convertirse en propietario de tierras en Lowick, abrigaba como es lógico el deseo de que el nuevo rector de la parroquia fuera una persona que disfrutara de su total aprobación; y consideraba un castigo y una advertencia por sus imperfecciones, y las del país en general, el hecho de que aproximadamente al mismo tiempo en que llegaban a su poder las escrituras que lo convertían en propietario de Stone Court, el señor Farebrother se instalara en la pintoresca iglesita y predicase su primer sermón a la feligresía de granjeros, jornaleros y artesanos. No era que el señor Bulstrode tuviera intención de frecuentar la iglesia de Lowick o de residir en Stone Court en un futuro próximo: había comprado la excelente granja y su hermosa vivienda tan solo como un retiro cuyas tierras podría ampliar poco a poco al mismo tiempo que embellecía la casa, hasta que fuese conveniente para la gloria de Dios que él la tomara como residencia, abandonando en parte sus esfuerzos presentes en la esfera de los negocios y poniendo de manera más manifiesta el peso de la propiedad agraria local del lado de la verdad evangélica, peso que quizá la Providencia se dignara aumentar con ocasiones de nuevas compras todavía no previsibles. Una clara indicación en este sentido parecía ser la facilidad sorprendente con que se había llevado a cabo la venta de Stone Court, cuando todo el mundo esperaba que el señor Rigg Featherstone se agarrase a ella como si se tratara del jardín del Edén. Eso era lo que el pobre Peter en persona había esperado, ya que con frecuencia, al imaginar que alzaba la vista por entre la tierra cubierta de hierba, ya sin problemas de perspectiva, había contemplado a su heredero de cara de rana disfrutando de su hermosa propiedad para sorpresa y desencanto perpetuos de otros parientes suyos.

Pero ¡qué poco sabemos de la idea que del paraíso se hacen nuestros vecinos! Juzgamos por nuestros deseos, y nuestros vecinos no siempre tienen la sinceridad suficiente para darnos alguna pista sobre los suyos. El frío y juicioso Joshua Rigg no permitió que su padre descubriera que Stone Court no significaba para él el bien supremo y, por otra parte, también es cierto que quería ser el dueño de aquella propiedad. Sin embargo, de la misma manera que Warren Hastings[121] miraba el oro y pensaba en comprar Daylesford, Joshua Rigg contemplaba Stone Court y pensaba en comprar oro. El heredero de Peter Featherstone tenía una visión muy clara e intensa de su bien supremo, ya que la vigorosa avaricia que llevaba en la sangre había tomado una forma especial en razón de las circunstancias: para Joshua Rigg el bien supremo era ser cambista. Desde su primer trabajo en un puerto de mar como chico de los recados, había mirado a través de las ventanas de los cambistas como otros chicos miran por las ventanas de las pastelerías; la fascinación se transformó gradualmente en una pasión muy honda y especial; Joshua tenía intención, cuando fuese propietario, de hacer muchas cosas, una de ellas casarse con una muchacha de buena posición social; pero todo aquello eran accidentes y alegrías de las que la imaginación podía prescindir. El gozo verdadero que su alma ambicionaba era tener una oficina de cambista en un muelle muy frecuentado, con muchos cajones cerrados de los que él guardaría las llaves, y dar una sensación de sublime frialdad en el manejo de las prolíficas monedas de todos los países, mientras la impotente avaricia lo contemplaba envidiosa desde el otro lado de un enrejado de hierro. La fuerza de aquella pasión le había permitido dominar todos los conocimientos necesarios para satisfacerla. Y cuando otros pensaban que se había instalado en Stone Court para el resto de su vida, Joshua consideraba que ya no tardaría en llegar el

momento de instalarse en el muelle norte con el mejor equipo de cajas fuertes y cerraduras.

Eso es suficiente. Lo que nos interesa es contemplar la venta de las tierras de Joshua Rigg desde el punto de vista del señor Bulstrode, y este último la interpretaba como un alentador acto providencial, sanción divina quizá a un plan que llevaba algún tiempo acariciando sin haber recibido aún aliento exterior; así era como Bulstrode lo interpretaba, pero sin excesiva confianza, ofreciendo su acción de gracias con cautelosa fraseología. Sus dudas no nacían de las posibles relaciones de aquel suceso con el destino de Joshua Rigg, destino que pertenecía a las ignotas regiones excluidas del gobierno de la Providencia, excepto quizá en una imperfecta manera colonial; sus dudas surgían al considerar que aquel acto de la Providencia también podía ser un castigo para el propio Bulstrode, como lo era sin duda la elección del señor Farebrother para la rectoría de Lowick.

Aquello no era lo que el banquero les decía a otras personas con intención de engañarlas: era lo que se decía a sí mismo; era su manera de explicar los acontecimientos y era tan auténtica como cualquier teoría que podamos tener los demás, en el caso de que no estemos de acuerdo con él. Porque el egoísmo que forma parte de nuestras teorías no influye en su sinceridad; por el contrario, cuanto más satisfacen nuestro egoísmo, más firme es nuestra fe en ellas.

En cualquier caso, tanto si se trataba de una recompensa como de un castigo, lo cierto es que, apenas quince meses después de la muerte de Peter Featherstone, el señor Bulstrode se convirtió en propietario de Stone Court, y lo que Peter diría «si fuese digno de saberlo» se había convertido en inagotable y consolador tema de conversación para sus chasqueados parientes. Las tornas se habían vuelto contra el querido hermano desaparecido y la contemplación del fracaso de su astucia ante la astucia superior de la vida en general era motivo de deleite para Solomon. La señora Waule disfrutaba de un melancólico triunfo al quedar demostrado que inventar Featherstone falsos y dar de lado a los auténticos no servía para nada; y la hermana Martha al recibir la noticia en Chalk Flats dijo: «¡Vaya, vaya! Entonces está claro que al Todopoderoso no le ha gustado mucho la idea de los asilos, después de todo».

La cariñosa señora Bulstrode apreciaba de manera especial los beneficios que la compra de Stone Court podrían suponer para la salud de su marido. Cada muy pocos días el banquero se trasladaba hasta allí a caballo para examinar alguna parte de la granja con el administrador, y las últimas horas de la tarde eran deliciosas en aquel lugar tan tranquilo, donde los nuevos almiares, recientemente alzados, despedían aromas que se mezclaban con el aliento del jardín añoso y florecido. Una tarde, cuando el sol estaba aún por encima del horizonte y ardía en lámparas doradas entre las ramas del gran nogal, el señor Bulstrode descansó un momento a caballo delante del portón de la entrada principal, esperando a Caleb Garth, a quien había citado previamente para que diera su opinión sobre un asunto del desagüe del establo y que en aquel momento estaba aconsejando al administrador sobre el cercado donde se alzaban los almiares.

El señor Bulstrode se sabía en buena disposición espiritual y más sereno que de costumbre gracias a la influencia benéfica de su inocente distracción. Desde un punto de vista doctrinal estaba convencido de que aquello no era en absoluto mérito suyo; pero una seguridad como esa puede mantenerse sin dificultades cuando el sentimiento de la falta de mérito no adquiere un perfil definido en la memoria ni reaviva el escozor de la vergüenza ni la punzada del remordimiento. Más aún, puede mantenerse con satisfacción intensa cuando la negrura de nuestros pecados no es más que la medida para calcular la generosidad del perdón y puede transformarse en prueba irrefutable de que somos instrumento singular en manos de la voluntad divina. La memoria tiene talantes tan diversos como el carácter y cambia de escenario con la misma facilidad que un diorama. En aquel momento el señor Bulstrode tenía la impresión de que la luz del sol era la misma de aquellas tardes tan lejanas cuando, todavía muy joven, salía a predicar más allá de Highbury. Y habría aceptado con gusto la perspectiva de repetir aquellos actos de exhortación. Los textos aún seguían presentes en su memoria y aún conservaba la elocuencia para exponerlos. Su breve ensoñación se vio interrumpida por la vuelta de Caleb Garth, también a caballo, que estaba ya agitando la brida para iniciar la marcha cuando exclamó:

—¡Dios bendito! ¿Quién es ese individuo vestido de negro que se acerca por el sendero? Parece uno de esos individuos que suelen verse rondando por ahí después de las carreras de caballos.

El señor Bulstrode hizo girar a su montura y miró en la dirección indicada, pero no hizo ningún comentario. La persona que llegaba era alguien a quien ya conocemos superficialmente, el señor Raffles, cuya apariencia no presentaba otros cambios que los introducidos por un traje negro y un trozo de crespón colgado del sombrero. Ahora estaba ya a unos tres metros de los jinetes, quienes vieron cómo se iluminaba su rostro mientras levantaba rápidamente el bastón y cómo, sin dejar de mirar al señor Bulstrode, exclamaba por fin:

—¡Caramba, Nick, si eres tú! ¡Nunca podría equivocarme, aunque estos veinticinco años hayan dejado

su marca en los dos! ¿Qué tal estás? Seguro que no esperabas verme por aquí. Vamos, estrecha esta mano.

Decir que los modales del señor Raffles manifestaban cierta agitación es tan solo una manera de explicar que caía la tarde. Caleb Garth advirtió un momento de forcejeo y de vacilación en el señor Bulstrode, quien terminó de todas formas por extender fríamente la mano y decir:

—Desde luego no esperaba verlo a usted en un rincón tan apartado.

—Bueno, lo cierto es que pertenece a un hijastro mío —dijo Raffles, tratando de adoptar una actitud jactanciosa—. Ya vine una vez a visitarlo. A decir verdad no me sorprende demasiado que estés aquí, amigo mío, porque hallé una carta…: lo que tú llamarías una cosa providencial. Ha sido una gran suerte encontrarte, de todas formas; porque no me apetece nada tratar con mi hijastro: no es un muchacho cariñoso y su pobre madre ya no está con nosotros. Si he de ser sincero, he venido por el afecto que te tengo, Nick; quería saber tu dirección, porque… ¡mira esto! —Raffles sacó del bolsillo un papel arrugado.

Casi cualquier otra persona que no fuera Caleb Garth hubiese sentido la tentación de quedarse allí un poco más para oír todo lo posible acerca de un hombre cuya relación con Bulstrode parecía indicar la existencia en la vida del banquero de episodios lo suficientemente distintos lo que se sabía de él en Middlemarch para despertar curiosidad. Pero Caleb era un ser peculiar: ciertas tendencias humanas que son comúnmente muy intensas apenas hallaban sitio en su espíritu; y una de ellas era la curiosidad sobre asuntos personales. En especial, si había algo deshonroso que descubrir relacionado con otros, Caleb prefería no saberlo; y si tenía que decirle a algún subordinado suyo que sus malas acciones habían salido a la luz, el señor Garth se sentía más avergonzado que el culpable. En aquel momento picó espuelas al caballo, que se puso al trote mientras él decía:

—Muy buenas tardes, señor Bulstrode; ya es hora de que me ponga en camino hacia casa.

—No dabas tu dirección completa en esta carta —continuó Raffles—. Algo impropio del hombre de negocios de primera clase que eras antes. «Los Arbustos» podría estar en cualquier sitio: vives por aquí cerca, ¿no es cierto? Has abandonado por completo los asuntos de Londres… Quizá te hayas convertido en hacendado… Dispones de una mansión a la que puedes invitarme. ¡Dios mío, cuántos años han pasado! La anciana señora debe de llevar mucho tiempo muerta… descansando en paz sin el dolor de saber lo pobremente que vivía su hija, ¿no es cierto? ¡Válgame el cielo! Te veo muy pálido y descolorido, Nick. Si vas hacia tu casa, te acompañaré.

Era verdad que la habitual palidez del señor Bulstrode había adquirido un tono casi cadavérico. Cinco minutos antes, toda la extensión de su vida había quedado bañada por el sol de su ocaso, que alargaba sus rayos hasta su rememorada mañana: el pecado parecía un asunto doctrinal y de penitencia interior; la humillación, un ejercicio de puertas adentro; el valor de sus acciones, una cuestión de punto de vista personal determinado únicamente por relaciones espirituales y cierta idea de la voluntad divina. Y de pronto, como por arte de magia, se había alzado ante él aquella figura rubicunda y vociferante de incontestable solidez: un pasado hecho carne que no entraba en sus cálculos sobre el castigo divino. Pero la cabeza del señor Bulstrode trabajaba con gran intensidad y, por otra parte, no era hombre que actuara o hablara de manera precipitada.

—Me dirigía hacia mi casa —dijo—, pero no tengo inconveniente en retrasarme un poco. Y usted, si le parece bien, puede descansar aquí.

—Gracias —dijo Raffles, haciendo una mueca—, pero no me interesa en absoluto ver a mi hijastro. Prefiero ir a tu casa.

—Su hijastro, si está usted hablando del señor Rigg Featherstone, ya no vive aquí. Ahora soy yo el propietario.

Raffles abrió mucho los ojos y dejó escapar un largo silbido de sorpresa antes de decir:

—En ese caso no tengo ninguna objeción. Ya he caminado bastante desde donde me dejó la diligencia. Nunca he sido andariego, ni tampoco aficionado a montar a caballo. Lo que me gusta es un buen coche y una jaca fogosa. Siempre me he sentido un poco torpe encima de una silla de montar. ¡Qué agradable sorpresa tiene que haber sido para ti verme aparecer, amigo mío! —continuó, mientras se volvían en dirección a la casa—. Tú no opinas así; pero es que nunca aceptaste tu buena suerte con entusiasmo… Siempre pensaste en mejorarla… tuviste verdadero talento para mejorar tu suerte.

El señor Raffles parecía disfrutar en gran manera con su propio ingenio y empezó a caminar de una manera tan fanfarrona que incluso la juiciosa paciencia de su acompañante no pudo resistirlo más.

—Si no recuerdo mal —observó el señor Bulstrode, con gélida indignación—, nuestra relación de hace muchos años no entrañaba el grado de intimidad que ahora está usted dando por sentado, señor Raffles. Cualquier favor que desee de mí le será concedido de manera más gustosa si evita ese tono de familiaridad que no existía en otro tiempo y que en ningún caso justifican más de veinte años de separación.

—¿No te gusta que te llame Nick? Lo cierto es que siempre te he llamado Nick en mi corazón, y aunque te perdí de vista me eras muy querido en el recuerdo. ¡Caramba! Mis sentimientos por ti han ido cogiendo solera como un buen aguardiente. Espero que tengas un poco en la casa. Josh me llenó el frasco a conciencia la última vez.

El señor Bulstrode no acababa aún de entender que en Raffles ni siquiera el deseo de aguardiente era tan intenso como el de atormentar, y que el menor indicio de enojo le servía al instante de estímulo. Pero al menos quedó claro que nada conseguiría con nuevas objeciones y, al dar órdenes al ama de llaves para que atendiera a su huésped, adoptó una actitud decididamente sosegada.

Cabía el consuelo de pensar que el ama de llaves había estado también al servicio de Rigg y podría aceptar la idea de que el señor Bulstrode agasajaba a Raffles meramente como amigo del anterior dueño. Una vez que hubo comida y bebida delante de su visitante en el salón principal y ningún testigo en el cuarto, el señor Bulstrode dijo:

—Sus costumbres y las mías son tan distintas, señor Raffles, que difícilmente podríamos disfrutar con nuestra respectiva compañía. El plan más sensato para los dos es que nos separemos cuanto antes. Puesto que quería verme, imagino que, en su opinión, tiene algún asunto que tratar conmigo. Dadas las circunstancias, voy a invitarle a que se quede aquí a pasar la noche; yo vendré mañana muy pronto, antes del desayuno, concretamente, y estaré entonces en condiciones de recibir cualquier comunicación que quiera hacerme.

—Acepto de todo corazón —dijo Raffles—, este sitio es muy cómodo… un poco aburrido para quedarse mucho tiempo; pero podré soportarlo durante una noche, disfrutando con este aguardiente tan bueno y con la perspectiva de verte de nuevo por la mañana. Eres mucho mejor anfitrión que mi hijastro; pero Josh me guardaba cierto rencor por haberme casado con su madre; y entre tú y yo no ha habido nunca más que afecto mutuo.

El señor Bulstrode, confiando en que la peculiar mezcla de jovialidad y sarcasmo que caracterizaba el comportamiento de Raffles dependiera en buena parte de la bebida, había decidido esperar a que estuviera sereno para continuar su diálogo. Pero mientras se dirigía hacia su casa vio con terrible claridad lo difícil que sería llegar con aquel hombre a algún resultado que pudiera considerarse definitivo. Era inevitable que el señor Bulstrode deseara librarse de John Raffles, aunque su reaparición no pudiera considerarse del todo ajena a los planes divinos. Podría haberlo enviado el espíritu del mal buscando la destrucción del señor Bulstrode como instrumento del bien; pero también aquella posibilidad tenía que haber sido permitida y era una penitencia de un tipo nuevo. Fue una hora de angustia muy diferente de las horas en que sus luchas espirituales habían sido íntimas y, por tanto, carentes de riesgos; luchas espirituales que terminaban con la sensación de que sus secretos delitos habían sido perdonados y se aceptaban sus servicios. Aquellos delitos, incluso en el momento de cometerlos, ¿no habían quedado santificados a medias por la sinceridad de su deseo de dedicarse, tanto él como todo lo que poseía, a la realización de los planes del Altísimo? ¿Iba él, después de todo, a convertirse en simple piedra de escándalo? Porque ¿quién entendería la acción de Dios en su interior? ¿Quién, con el pretexto del oprobio caído sobre él, dejaría de confundir su vida con las verdades que había defendido, convirtiéndolo todo en un montón de infamias?

Hasta en sus meditaciones más secretas, la costumbre de toda una vida hacía que el señor Bulstrode vistiera sus terrores más egoístas con referencias doctrinales a fines sobrehumanos. Pero incluso cuando hablamos y meditamos sobre la órbita de la tierra y sobre el sistema solar, lo que sentimos y a lo que ajustamos nuestros movimientos es la estabilidad del suelo que pisamos y los cambios de la luz a lo largo del día. Y ahora, junto a la sucesión automática de frases teóricas, tan claro e íntimo como el escalofrío y el dolor abstracto, surgía el presentimiento de la deshonra ante sus vecinos y su mujer. Porque la humillación, así como la valoración pública de la deshonra, dependen de las aspiraciones previas. Para hombres cuya única meta es no llegar al crimen, solo supone deshonra tener que sentarse en el banquillo de los acusados. Pero el señor Bulstrode se había propuesto ser un cristiano eminente.

No eran más de la siete y media de la mañana cuando se presentó de nuevo en Stone Court. La hermosa casa antigua nunca había tenido más aspecto de hogar acogedor que en aquellos momentos; los grandes lirios blancos estaban en flor; las capuchinas, con sus bellas hojas convertidas en plata por el rocío, llegaban a perderse a lo lejos sobre la valla de piedra de poca altura; los mismos ruidos del entorno encerraban un eco de paz en su interior. Pero todo ello carecía de valor para el propietario mientras recorría el sendero de grava frente a la casa y esperaba a que apareciese, procedente del piso alto, el señor Raffles, con quien estaba condenado a desayunar.

Antes de que transcurriera mucho tiempo se hallaban los dos sentados en el salón principal delante del té y de las tostadas, que era todo lo que Raffles estaba dispuesto a tomar a aquella hora tan temprana. Las

diferencias entre su estado de ánimo matutino y el vespertino no eran tan notables como su acompañante había imaginado; la satisfacción que experimentaba atormentando a los demás quizá era aún mayor por encontrarse de un humor menos artificialmente exaltado. Sin duda alguna sus modales parecían más desagradables con la luz de la mañana.

—Como dispongo de muy poco tiempo, señor Raffles —dijo el banquero, que apenas pudo hacer otra cosa que beber unos sorbos de té y partir una tostada sin llegar a comérsela—, le quedaré muy agradecido si me dice cuanto antes el motivo por el que deseaba tener esta entrevista conmigo. Presumo que cuenta usted con un hogar en algún sitio y que se alegrará de regresar a él.

—Si un hombre tiene corazón, ¿no es lógico que quiera ver a un viejo amigo, Nick?… He de llamarte Nick… siempre te llamábamos el joven Nick cuando supimos que querías casarte con la anciana viuda. Algunos dijeron que tenías un aire de familia con el viejo Nick[122], pero de eso tuvo la culpa tu madre, por llamarte Nicholas. ¿No te alegras de verme de nuevo? Esperaba que me invitaras a hacerte compañía en algún hermoso lugar. Mi casa ha desaparecido con la muerte de mi mujer. No tengo apego a ningún sitio; lo mismo me daría instalarme aquí que en cualquier otro lugar.

—¿Puedo preguntarle por qué regresó de América? Siempre consideré que el gran deseo que usted manifestó de ir allí, si se le proporcionaba la suma conveniente, equivalía a un compromiso de quedarse allí para siempre.

—Nunca he sabido que el deseo de ir a un sitio equivalga al de quedarse. Estuve allí alrededor de diez años; no me apeteció seguir más tiempo. Y no tengo intención de volver, Nick. —Aquí el señor Raffles guiñó un ojo calmosamente mientras miraba al señor Bulstrode.

—¿Desea emprender algún negocio? ¿A qué se dedica ahora?

—Muchas gracias, pero ahora me dedico a disfrutar de la vida todo lo que puedo. No tengo interés en volver a trabajar. Si hiciera algo sería viajar un poco por cuenta del ramo del tabaco… o algo por el estilo, una de esas ocupaciones que proporcionan compañías agradables. Pero no sin una situación independiente, unas reservas a las que poder volver. Eso es lo que quiero: ya no estoy tan fuerte como antes, Nick, aunque tenga mejor color que tú. Quiero ser independiente.

—Eso se podría conseguir, si usted se comprometiera a mantenerse alejado —dijo el señor Bulstrode, quizá con un tono de excesiva ansiedad, a pesar de hablar en voz baja.

—Tendrá que ser de acuerdo con mi conveniencia —dijo Raffles con gran aplomo—. No veo razón para no hacer unas cuantas amistades por estos alrededores. Me considero más que capacitado para alternar con cualquiera. Dejé la maleta donde me bajé de la diligencia, en la posada junto al camino real… con mudas de ropa limpia… de verdad… ¡a fe de caballero!… no solo pecheras y puños; y reconoce que con este traje de luto, tirillas y todo lo demás, no te dejaría en mal lugar ante los peces gordos de aquí. —El señor Raffles había separado su silla de la mesa, para contemplar su propia indumentaria, especialmente las tirillas. Su principal propósito era molestar a Bulstrode, pero creía realmente que su apariencia produciría un buen efecto en cualquiera, y que no solo era bien parecido e ingenioso, sino que el estilo de su traje de luto sugería la existencia de sólidos parentescos.

—Si tiene usted intención de depender de mí de algún modo, señor Raffles —dijo Bulstrode—, será necesario que se acomode a mis deseos.

—¡Naturalmente que sí! —dijo Raffles, con burlona cordialidad—. ¿No es eso lo que he hecho siempre? ¡Cielos! ¡Bien que me utilizaste y bien poco fue lo que saqué yo en limpio! Muchas veces he pensado desde entonces que mejor me habría ido contándole a la vieja que encontré a su hija y a su nieto: eso habría estado más de acuerdo con mis sentimientos, porque no soy de piedra. Pero ya habrás enterrado a la buena señora, supongo… y ahora le dará todo igual. Y tú hiciste fortuna con aquel provechoso negocio que contaba con bendiciones tan oportunas. Te has convertido en pez gordo, compras tierras, eres todo un pachá rural. ¿Sigues en la línea de los disidentes? ¿Vives todavía como un hombre devoto? ¿O te has pasado a la Iglesia anglicana por más elegante?

Esta vez, el lento guiño y ligera exhibición de lengua por parte del señor Raffles fueron algo peor que una pesadilla, porque encerraban la certeza de que aquello no era una pesadilla, sino una calamidad bien real. El señor Bulstrode sintió una repugnancia que le hizo estremecerse; no dijo nada, sin embargo, porque estaba considerando con gran diligencia si no sería mejor dejar que Raffles hiciese lo que quisiera y denunciarlo luego como calumniador. Un hombre así se desacreditaría en seguida y la gente dejaría de creerlo. «Pero no cuando cuente una verdad muy desagradable sobre ti», dijo una juiciosa voz interior. Y de nuevo: no parecía haber nada malo en mantener alejado a Raffles; por otra parte el señor Bulstrode se resistía a mentir con descaro negando afirmaciones ciertas. Una cosa era volver la vista hacia pecados perdonados, más aún, explicar una censurable aceptación de laxitud en las costumbres, y otra crearse

adrede la necesidad de mentir.

Pero como Bulstrode guardó silencio, Raffles continuó, dispuesto a utilizar al máximo el tiempo de que disponía.

—¡Yo no he tenido tanta suerte como tú, caramba! Las cosas no me pudieron ir peor en Nueva York; esos yanquis son personas sin escrúpulos y un hombre de sentimientos caballerosos no tiene allí la menor posibilidad. Me casé al volver… una buena mujer que se dedicaba al negocio del tabaco… Me tenía mucho cariño… pero el negocio era limitado, como decimos nosotros. Muchos años antes un amigo la ayudó a instalarse; pero había un hijo que estaba muy al tanto. Josh y yo no nos entendimos nunca. De todas formas, le saqué al asunto todo el partido posible y siempre he estado en condiciones de tomar unas copas en buena compañía. He vivido honradamente y no tengo nada que ocultar. Estoy seguro de que no te vas a enfadar conmigo por no haber venido antes a verte; sufro una dolencia que me lleva a retrasar un poco las cosas. Pensé que todavía seguirías comerciando y rezando en Londres y no logré encontrarte allí. Pero ya ves que te he sido enviado, Nick… quizá como una bendición para los dos.

El señor Raffles terminó con un jocoso resoplido: ningún hombre se sentía tan por encima de la hipocresía religiosa como él. Y si la astucia que sabe sacar partido de los sentimientos más mezquinos de los hombres puede recibir el nombre de intelecto, no andaba escaso de él, porque bajo la manera descuidada y zumbona que tenía de hablar a Bulstrode había una evidente selección en sus manifestaciones, como si se tratara de otras tantas jugadas de ajedrez. El banquero mientras tanto había decidido ya la pieza que iba a mover y dijo, con renovada decisión:

—No estará de más, señor Raffles, que reflexione sobre la posibilidad de ir demasiado lejos en el esfuerzo por lograr unos beneficios excesivos. Aunque no me hallo en ningún modo ligado a usted, estoy dispuesto a suministrarle una renta anual, en pagos cuatrimestrales, si se compromete a no acercarse por esta zona. La elección está en sus manos. Si insiste en quedarse aquí, aunque sea por muy poco tiempo, nada conseguirá de mí. Negaré haberlo conocido nunca.

—¡Ja, ja! —dijo Raffles, con una fingida explosión de regocijo—, eso me recuerda a un ladrón muy bromista que se negó a reconocer al policía que lo detuvo.

—Sus alusiones no me atañen en absoluto —dijo Bulstrode, muy acalorado—; la justicia no tiene ningún poder sobre mí ni por mediación de usted ni de ninguna otra persona.

—Está visto que nunca entenderás un chiste, amigo mío. Solo quería decir que yo nunca negaré conocerte. Pero hablemos en serio. Tus pagos cuatrimestrales no me convienen del todo. Me gusta la libertad.

Al llegar aquí Raffles se puso en pie y recorrió la habitación una o dos veces moviéndose airosamente y adoptando aire de meditar a fondo. A la larga se detuvo frente a Bulstrode y dijo:

—¡Voy a decirte lo que quiero! Dame un par de cientos… Vamos, eso es poca cosa… y me marcharé… ¡palabra de caballero! Recogeré la maleta y me iré. Pero no renunciaré a mi libertad por una miserable renta anual. Iré y vendré cuando y donde me plazca. Quizá me convenga seguir lejos y mantener correspondencia con un amigo; quizá no. ¿Llevas el dinero encima?

—No; solo tengo cien —dijo Bulstrode, sintiendo que la liberación inmediata era un alivio demasiado grande para rechazarlo por el temor a incertidumbres futuras—. Le mandaré la otra mitad si me indica una dirección donde hacerlo.

—No; esperaré aquí a que me lo traigas —dijo Raffles—. Me daré un paseo, comeré algo y para entonces ya estarás de vuelta.

El cuerpo poco robusto del señor Bulstrode, destrozado por la angustia que había padecido desde la tarde anterior, le hizo sentirse abyectamente en poder de aquel hombre vulgar e invulnerable. De momento no tenía otra solución que aferrarse a un descanso momentáneo al precio que fuese. Se estaba levantando ya para hacer lo que Raffles sugería, cuando este último dijo, alzando un dedo como si repentinamente se acordara de algo:

—Aún busqué una vez más a Sarah, pero no te dije nada; siempre me enterneció un poco aquella muchacha tan bonita. No la encontré, aunque sí descubrí el apellido de su marido y lo apunté. Pero, maldita sea, perdí la agenda. Sin embargo, lo oí y lo reconocería si lo oyera de nuevo. Estoy tan en posesión de todas mis facultades como en la flor de la edad, pero los apellidos se me escapan, ¡caramba! A veces no soy mejor que un maldito formulario antes de rellenar las casillas. De todas maneras, si me entero de algo acerca de ella y de su familia, te lo haré saber, Nick. Tal vez quieras ayudarla, ahora que es tu hijastra.

—Sin duda alguna —dijo el señor Bulstrode, con la habitual expresión de firmeza en sus ojos de color gris claro—, aunque quizá eso reduzca mis posibilidades de ayudarlo a usted.

Mientras salía de la habitación, Raffles guiñó un ojo lentamente a sus espaldas y luego se dirigió hacia la

ventana para ver alejarse al banquero… que estaba prácticamente a su disposición. Sus labios se curvaron en una sonrisa para abrirse luego en breve risotada triunfal.

—¿Cómo demonios era aquel apellido? —dijo en seguida, casi en voz alta, rascándose la cabeza y arrugando el entrecejo. En realidad no le había preocupado ni había pensado en aquel síntoma de mala memoria hasta que se le ocurrió utilizarlo para molestar a Bulstrode—. Empezaba por ele; casi diría que no tenía más que eles —continuó, con la sensación de que estaba a punto de recordar el apellido escurridizo. Pero el punto de apoyo era demasiado tenue y pronto se cansó de aquella caza mental; porque pocos hombres se aburrían tan pronto de una tarea silenciosa o estaban más necesitados que el señor Raffles de hacerse oír continuamente. Prefirió usar el tiempo de que disponía en agradable conversación con el administrador y el ama de llaves, de quienes obtuvo toda la información que necesitaba sobre la posición del señor Bulstrode en Middlemarch.

Al final, sin embargo, aún dispuso de algún tiempo sin ocupación que fue necesario aliviar con pan, queso y cerveza, y cuando el señor Raffles se quedó a solas con aquellas provisiones en el salón, se dio de pronto una palmada en la rodilla y exclamó:

—¡Ladislaw!

El proceso memorístico, que había tratado de poner en marcha y abandonado por falta de resultados, llegó de repente a término sin esfuerzo consciente: una experiencia muy común, tan agradable como completar un estornudo, aunque el nombre que se recuerde no tenga ningún valor. Raffles sacó al instante su libreta y apuntó el apellido, no porque pensara utilizarlo, sino tan solo para no sentirse perdido si alguna vez llegaba a necesitarlo. No pensaba decírselo a Bulstrode: no servía de nada hacerlo en aquel momento, y para una mentalidad como la del señor Raffles siempre existe la posibilidad de encontrar alguna ventaja en conservar un secreto.

Se dio por satisfecho con el éxito obtenido y para las tres de la tarde de aquel mismo día había recogido su maleta en la hospedería y tomado asiento en la diligencia, liberando, a ojos del señor Bulstrode, el paisaje de Stone Court de un feo punto negro, pero no del temor de que pudiera reaparecer y convertirse incluso en parte inseparable de la decoración de su propio hogar.

Libro sexto

La viuda y la esposa

Capítulo LIV

Negli occhi porta la mia donna Amore,
Per che si fa gentil ciò ch'ella mira;
Ov'ella passa, ogni uom ver lei si gira,
E cui saluta fa tremar lo core,

Sicchè, bassando il viso, tutto smore,
E d'ogni suo difetto allor sospira:
Fuggon dinanzi a lei Superbia ed Ira.
Aiutatemi, donne, farle onore.

Ogni dolcezza, ogni pensiero umile
Nasce nel core a chi parlar la sente;
Ond'è beato chi prima la vide.

Quel ch'ella par quand'un poco sorride,
Non si può dicer, nè tenere a mente,
Si è novo miracolo e gentile.[123]

DANTE, *La Vita Nuova*

En aquella deliciosa mañana en que los almiares de Stone Court perfumaban el aire con absoluta imparcialidad, como si el señor Raffles fuese un huésped digno del incienso más delicado, Dorothea volvió a instalarse en Lowick Manor. Al cabo de tres meses, Freshitt Hall se había convertido en un lugar bastante opresivo: quedarse inmóvil como modelo para una santa Catalina, contemplando con arrobamiento al hijo de Celia, no podía prolongarse muchas horas durante un mismo día, y estar en presencia de aquel bebé tan importante con una persistente falta de interés era un comportamiento que no se hubiese tolerado en una hermana sin hijos. Dorothea habría podido llevar en brazos al niño por espacio de dos kilómetros si hubiera sido necesario, queriéndolo aún con mayor ternura en razón de aquel esfuerzo; pero una tía que no reconoce a su sobrino de pocos meses como Buda, y que no puede hacer por él más que admirarlo, está expuesta a que su comportamiento le parezca monótono y limitado el interés que despierta su contemplación.

Semejante posibilidad resultaba por completo insospechable para Celia, para quien la viudez sin hijos de Dorothea encajaba de manera muy conveniente con el nacimiento del pequeño Arthur (el niño se llamaba así en honor del señor Brooke).

—Dodo es una persona a la que le da lo mismo no tener nada propio… ¡hijos o cualquier otra cosa! —le dijo Celia a su marido—. Y si hubiese tenido un hijo varón nunca habría sido tan maravilloso como Arthur, ¿no es cierto, James?

—No, si hubiera sido como Casaubon —respondió sir James, a sabiendas de que su respuesta era un tanto tortuosa y de que se reservaba una opinión estrictamente personal sobre las perfecciones de su primogénito.

—¡Claro que no! Basta con imaginarlo. En realidad ha sido una bendición —dijo Celia— y creo que a Dodo le viene muy bien ser viuda. Puede querer a nuestro hijo tanto como si fuera suyo y tener todas las ideas propias que le apetezca.

—Es una lástima que no haya sido reina —dijo el devoto sir James.

—¿Qué hubiéramos sido nosotros en ese caso? Sin duda algo distinto —dijo Celia, protestando contra tan complicado vuelo de la imaginación—. Dodo me gusta más como es.

De aquí que cuando descubrió que Dorothea estaba haciendo los preparativos para trasladarse definitivamente a Lowick, alzara las cejas desengañada y lanzase, con su estilo tranquilo y ecuánime, una pequeña flecha de sarcasmo.

—¿De qué te vas a ocupar en Lowick, Dodo? Tú misma dices que no hay nada que hacer: todo el mundo es tan limpio y vive tan desahogadamente que te pones muy melancólica. Y aquí has sido feliz recorriendo Tipton con el señor Garth y entrando hasta en los peores corrales. Ahora que el tío se ha ido al extranjero, el señor Garth y tú podéis cambiar lo que os apetezca; y estoy segura de que James hace todo lo que le dices.

—Vendré aquí con mucha frecuencia y me daré cuenta mucho mejor de cómo crece el niño —dijo Dorothea.

—Pero no lo verás nunca cuando lo bañemos —dijo Celia—, que es sin duda la mejor parte del día. —Estaba casi haciendo pucheros; le parecía muy duro que Dodo se separara del bebé cuando bien podía quedarse.

—Querida Kitty, vendré y me quedaré ex profeso a pasar la noche —dijo Dorothea—; pero ahora quiero estar sola y en mi propia casa. Deseo conocer mejor a los Farebrother y hablar con el nuevo rector de lo que debe hacerse en Middlemarch.

La característica fuerza de voluntad de Dorothea no se transformaba ya por completo en sumisión voluntariamente aceptada. Tenía un deseo muy vivo de volver a Lowick y estaba decidida a irse, sin sentir la obligación de explicar sus razones. Quienes la rodeaban, sin embargo, desaprobaban su decisión. Sir James estaba muy apenado y propuso que emigraran todos a Cheltenham durante unos meses con el arca de la alianza, también llamada cuna: en aquel período un hombre no sabía ya qué sugerir si se rechazaba Cheltenham.

Lady Chettam, la madre de sir James, que volvía de visitar a su hija en Londres, manifestó su deseo de que, por lo menos, se escribiera a la señora Vigo, invitándola a aceptar el puesto de dama de compañía de la señora Casaubon: no era concebible que Dorothea, en su situación de joven viuda, pensara en vivir sola en la casa de Lowick. La señora Vigo había sido lectora y secretaria de personajes regios y en cuanto a conocimientos y sensibilidad ni siquiera Dorothea podría ponerle la menor objeción.

La señora Cadwallader le dijo en privado:

—No hay duda de que enloquecerás si te quedas sola en esa casa, querida. Empezarás a tener visiones. Todos hemos de esforzarnos un poco por mantenernos en nuestro sano juicio y llamar a las cosas por el mismo nombre que otras personas. Es cierto que para los segundones y las mujeres sin dinero es una solución volverse locos, porque entonces hay alguien que los cuida. Pero no existe razón para que te pase a ti. Yo diría que te aburres un poco con nuestra buena lady Chettam; pero piensa en lo aburrida que les resultarías a los demás si estuvieras siempre interpretando la reina de la tragedia y tomándote las cosas por lo sublime. Sentada tú sola en esa biblioteca de Lowick se te puede ocurrir que tienes poder sobre el sol y la lluvia; necesitas unas cuantas personas alrededor que no te crean si se lo cuentas. Esa es una buena medicina para rebajar hinchazones.

—Nunca he llamado a las cosas como los demás —dijo Dorothea resueltamente.

—Pero supongo que ya te has dado cuenta de tu error, querida —dijo la señora Cadwallader—, y eso es una prueba de cordura.

Dorothea advirtió el sarcasmo, pero no se sintió herida.

—No —dijo—, todavía pienso que casu todo el mundo se equivoca sobre muchas cosas. Sin duda es posible estar cuerdo y pensar así, puesto que la mayor parte de las personas ha tenido que cambiar de opinión con frecuencia.

La señora Cadwallader no dijo nada más sobre aquel punto, pero comentó con su marido:

—Le convendría casarse de nuevo tan pronto como sea decoroso, si fuese posible introducirla en el círculo apropiado. Los Chettam, por supuesto, no querrán. Pero veo con toda claridad que un marido es lo mejor para que no haga tonterías. Si no fuésemos tan pobres invitaría a lord Triton. Será marqués algún día y no puede negarse que Dorothea haría una excelente marquesa; está más hermosa que nunca vestida de luto.

—Mi querida Elinor, haz el favor de dejar tranquila a esa pobre mujer. Semejantes maquinaciones no sirven para nada —dijo el amable rector.

—¿Que no sirven para nada? ¿Cómo se consigue que se case la gente, si no es juntando a hombres y

mujeres? Y es una vergüenza que su tío salga corriendo y cierre Tipton Grange precisamente ahora. Habría que invitar a Freshitt Hall y a Tipton Grange a muchos buenos partidos. Lord Triton es exactamente el hombre que le conviene a Dorothea: lleno de planes para hacer feliz a la gente de una manera un tanto simple. Eso le vendría muy bien.

—Deja que la señora Casaubon escoja por sí misma, Elinor.

—¡Esas son las tonterías que decís los hombres juiciosos! ¿Cómo va a escoger si no tiene varias posibilidades? La libertad de una mujer consiste por lo común en escoger al único hombre disponible. Fíjate bien en lo que digo, Humphrey. Si sus familiares no hacen algo, aún tendremos un desastre peor que el de Casaubon.

—¡Por el amor de Dios, Elinor, no vuelvas a tocar ese tema! Es un asunto muy espinoso para sir James. Se ofendería mucho si lo sacaras a relucir sin necesidad.

—Yo no lo he sacado nunca a relucir —dijo la señora Cadwallader abriendo las manos—. Celia me contó lo del testamento muy al principio, sin que yo le preguntase nada.

—Sí, sí; pero quieren echar tierra encima y tengo entendido que ese joven está a punto de marcharse.

La señora Cadwallader no dijo nada, pero hizo a su marido tres significativas inclinaciones de cabeza, acompañadas de una expresión muy sarcástica en sus ojos oscuros.

Dorothea, sin perder la calma, perseveró en su idea a pesar de reproches y razonamientos. De manera que para finales de junio las contraventanas estaban otra vez abiertas en Lowick Manor y la mañana posaba calmosamente su mirada sobre la biblioteca, brillando en las hileras de libretas como brilla sobre el yermo uniforme donde se alzan piedras gigantescas, mudos testigos de una fe perdida; y la tarde, cargada de olor a rosas, se apoderaba en silencio del *boudoir* verde azulado donde Dorothea solía instalarse con frecuencia. Al principio la señora Casaubon entraba en todas las habitaciones, interrogándose sobre los dieciocho meses de su vida de casada y dando forma a sus pensamientos como si fueran un parlamento que su marido tuviera que oír. Después se quedaba más tiempo en la biblioteca y no descansó hasta colocar cuidadosamente todos los cuadernos como se imaginaba que a él le gustaría verlos, en ordenada sucesión. La piedad, que había sido el principal motivo de contención durante su vida en común, seguía adherida a su recuerdo, incluso cuando lo reconvenía, mentalmente indignada, y le decía que era injusto. Una insignificante acción suya quizá haga sonreír por supersticiosa. Metió en un sobre la «Ordenación sinóptica para uso de la señora Casaubon» y lo cerró cuidadosamente, escribiendo en él: «No podría usarla. ¿No te das cuenta ahora de que no me sería posible someter mi alma a la tuya, trabajando en algo en lo que no creo? Dorothea». Luego lo depositó en su propio escritorio.

Aquel coloquio silencioso era quizá más vivo aún debido a que por debajo y a todo lo largo de él seguía presente el profundo anhelo que había determinado su vuelta a Lowick. Y aquel anhelo era ver a Will Ladislaw. Dorothea se daba cuenta de su impotencia, de que nada positivo podía salir de aquella entrevista: tenía las manos atadas y no se hallaba en condiciones de resarcirlo por injusticias pasadas. Pero deseaba verlo con toda el alma. ¿Cómo podía ser de otra manera? Si una princesa hubiese visto, en los días de su encantamiento, una criatura de cuatro patas, de las que viven en rebaños, acercarse a ella una y otra vez con mirada humana y expresión suplicante, ¿en qué pensaría durante sus viajes? ¿Qué buscaría cuando pasaran junto a ella los rebaños? Sin duda alguna la mirada que la había elegido y que ella reconocería. La vida no sería más que oropel y hojarasca si nuestro espíritu no se conmoviera por lo que ha sido, si no se orientara hacia cuestiones de anhelos y perseverancia. Era cierto que Dorothea quería conocer mejor a los Farebrother y especialmente al nuevo rector, pero también era cierto que, recordando lo que Lydgate le había dicho sobre Will Ladislaw y la diminuta señorita Noble, contaba con que Will fuese a Lowick para ver a la familia Farebrother. El primer domingo, antes de entrar en la iglesia, Dorothea lo vio como lo había visto la última vez que estuvo, solo en el banco del vicario; pero cuando entró, su figura se había desvanecido.

Los días de entre semana en que iba a ver a las señoras de la rectoría, escuchaba en vano a la espera de que se les escapara alguna palabra sobre Will; parecía, sin embargo, que la señora Farebrother hablaba de todas las personas de la zona, e incluso de fuera de ella, pero nunca de él.

—Es probable que algunos de los feligreses que escuchaban al señor Farebrother en Middlemarch quizá lo sigan en ocasiones hasta Lowick. ¿No lo cree usted así? —dijo Dorothea, despreciándose más bien por tener un motivo secreto para hacer aquella pregunta.

—Si son prudentes lo harán, señora Casaubon —dijo la anciana señora—. Ya veo que da usted su justo valor a la predicación de mi hijo. Su abuelo materno era un eclesiástico excelente, pero su padre se dedicó al derecho: un hombre ejemplar y muy honrado de todas formas, lo que explica que nunca hayamos sido ricos. Dicen que la Fortuna es mujer y caprichosa. Pero a veces es una buena mujer y da a los que se lo

merecen, como en el caso de usted, señora Casaubon, que ha dado un beneficio a mi hijo.

La señora Farebrother reanudó su labor de punto con satisfecha dignidad por el éxito de su pequeño esfuerzo oratorio, si bien no era aquello lo que Dorothea quería oír. ¡Pobrecilla!, ignoraba incluso si Will Ladislaw seguía en Middlemarch y no había nadie a quien se atreviera a preguntárselo, con la excepción de Lydgate. Y precisamente en aquel momento no podía ver a Lydgate sin hacerlo llamar o ir en su busca. Quizá Ladislaw, al enterarse de aquella extraña prohibición contra él en el testamento del señor Casaubon, había considerado más conveniente que Dorothea y él no volvieran a verse, y tal vez ella se equivocaba al desear una entrevista que por muchas razones otras personas podían juzgar de todo punto inconveniente. Sin embargo, al final de aquellas juiciosas reflexiones, venía el «lo deseo» con la misma naturalidad de un sollozo después de contener el aliento. Y la entrevista tuvo lugar, pero de una manera ceremoniosa, que Dorothea no esperaba en absoluto.

Una mañana, a eso de las once, estaba sentada en su *boudoir* con un mapa de las tierras anexas a Lowick Manor y con algunos documentos que debían ayudarla a hacer una relación exacta de sus ingresos y de otras cuestiones económicas para su uso personal. Antes de ponerse a trabajar, con las manos cruzadas sobre el regazo, se quedó contemplando la avenida de tilos hasta los campos más distantes. Todas las hojas estaban inmóviles bajo la luz del sol y la escena familiar permanecía inmutable: daba la impresión de representar su perspectiva vital, la de una abundancia desprovista de propósito… a menos que su propia energía encontrara razones para actuar apasionadamente. La toca de viuda de aquellos tiempos creaba un marco oval para el rostro y tenía una especie de corona; el vestido era un experimento sobre cómo utilizar la mayor cantidad posible de crespón; pero toda aquella solemnidad en el atuendo lograba que su cara pareciese aún más joven, con su recobrada lozanía y el dulce e inquisitivo candor de sus ojos.

Sus ensoñaciones se vieron interrumpidas por Tantripp, que vino a decirle que el señor Ladislaw estaba abajo y que pedía permiso para ver a la señora si no era demasiado pronto.

—Lo veré en seguida —dijo Dorothea, levantándose de inmediato—. Haz que lo pasen al salón.

El salón, situado debajo del *boudoir* y con un único mirador que daba a la avenida de tilos, era para ella la habitación más neutral de la casa, la menos asociada con las tribulaciones de su vida de casada: el damasco hacía juego con el trabajo de la madera, todo él en blanco y oro; había dos espejos altos y mesas vacías; era, en resumen, una habitación en la que no existían motivos para sentarse en un sitio con preferencia sobre otro. Cuando Pratt condujo allí a Will Ladislaw, la ventana estaba abierta y un alado visitante, que entraba y salía de vez en cuando, indiferente al mobiliario, con su zumbido característico, hacía que el cuarto resultara menos solemne y deshabitado.

—Me alegro de verle por aquí otra vez, señor —respondió Pratt, quedándose un momento en la habitación para ajustar una cortina.

—Solo he venido a decir adiós, Pratt —dijo Will, que deseaba informar incluso al mayordomo de que él tenía demasiado orgullo para seguir cerca de la señora Casaubon ahora que era una viuda rica.

—Lo siento mucho, señor —dijo Pratt, retirándose. Por supuesto, en su calidad de criado a quien no se dice nada, estaba informado de lo que Ladislaw aún desconocía y había sacado sus conclusiones, coincidiendo plenamente con Tantripp, su prometida, cuando ella le dijo: «Tu amo era tan celoso como un demonio… y sin razón alguna. La señora mirará más alto que el señor Ladislaw, la conozco demasiado bien. La doncella de la señora Cadwallader dice que va a venir un lord que se casará con ella tan pronto como se quite el luto».

Will no tuvo mucho tiempo para pasearse por la habitación con el sombrero en la mano antes de que entrara Dorothea. El encuentro fue muy diferente de aquel primero en Roma, con un Will dominado por la turbación frente a una tranquila Dorothea. Ahora se sentía desdichado pero decidido, mientras que ella se encontraba en un estado de agitación imposible de ocultar. Un momento antes Dorothea había comprendido que aquella entrevista tan deseada era en realidad demasiado difícil y, cuando vio a Will avanzando hacia ella, un intenso rubor nada frecuente coloreó sus mejillas con penosa celeridad. No supieron cómo fue, pero ninguno de los dos habló. Dorothea le ofreció la mano un instante y luego se sentaron cerca de la ventana, ella en un sofá y él en otro situado enfrente. Will no estaba particularmente incómodo: le pareció extraño que el simple hecho de su viudedad produjera tal cambio en la manera que Dorothea tenía de recibirlo, y no sabía de ninguna otra cosa que hubiese podido afectar sus relaciones anteriores… excepto que, como su imaginación le sugirió al instante, sus familiares hubieran conseguido que naciera en ella la desconfianza.

—Espero no haber sido demasiado atrevido al venir a visitarla —dijo Will—; no soportaba la idea de abandonar Middlemarch y empezar una nueva vida sin verla para decirle adiós.

—¿Atrevido? Claro que no. Me habría parecido muy mal que no hubiese usted pensado en venir a verme

—dijo Dorothea, logrando que su costumbre de hablar siempre con total sinceridad se afirmara a pesar de su incertidumbre y de su confusión—. ¿Se marcha en seguida?

—Creo que muy pronto. Tengo intención de ir a Londres y hacerme abogado, porque, según dicen, esa es la mejor preparación para la vida pública. A la larga habrá mucha labor política que hacer y tengo intención de colaborar en esa tarea, si es posible. Otros hombres han logrado ganarse una posición honorable sin familia ni dinero.

—Y eso hará que sea aún más honorable —dijo Dorothea, con vehemencia—. Además, tiene usted muchas cualidades. Le he oído decir a mi tío que habla muy bien en público, hasta el punto de que a todos se le hacen cortos sus discursos, y que explica usted las cosas con mucha claridad. También sé de su preocupación por que se haga justicia a todo el mundo. Me alegro mucho. Cuando estábamos en Roma creí que solo le interesaban la poesía y el arte y las cosas que hacen la vida agradable a las personas que tenemos buena posición social. Pero ahora sé que también se interesa por los demás.

Mientras hablaba, Dorothea había perdido su turbación y recobrado su manera de ser habitual. Al terminar sus palabras, miró a Will de lleno a los ojos, rebosante de satisfecha confianza.

—¿Aprueba usted entonces que me ausente durante años y no vuelva aquí nunca hasta que me haya labrado una posición en el mundo? —dijo Will, esforzándose por conciliar un máximo de orgullo con un desesperado esfuerzo por lograr de Dorothea una clara expresión de sus sentimientos.

Ella no llegó a darse cuenta del tiempo que tardó en responder. Había vuelto la cabeza y estaba mirando por la ventana a los rosales, que parecían encerrar los veranos de todos los años que Will pasaría lejos. No era un comportamiento juicioso. A Dorothea, sin embargo, no se le ocurrió calcular el efecto de sus gestos y expresiones: pensaba tan solo en inclinarse ante la triste necesidad que iba a separarla de Will. Aquellas primeras palabras acerca de sus intenciones parecían dejarlo todo en claro: Ladislaw estaba al tanto, supuso, del gesto final del señor Casaubon y le había producido el mismo impacto que a ella. Will nunca había sentido más que amistad: nunca había abrigado deseos que justificaran lo que Dorothea consideraba el ultraje de su marido a los sentimientos de ambos… y esa amistad aún seguía viva. Algo que podría recibir el nombre de sollozo interior se produjo en Dorothea antes de que dijera con voz muy clara, pero con un temblor en las últimas palabras, que pareció deberse tan solo a la pureza de su timbre:

—Sí; eso debe de ser lo más acertado. Me sentiré muy feliz cuando oiga que ha conseguido usted demostrar su valía. Pero tiene que tener paciencia. Quizá se necesite mucho tiempo.

Will nunca supo del todo cómo logró no echarse a sus pies cuando el «mucho tiempo» vibró en el aire con su suave temblor. Más adelante solía decir que el horrible color y aspecto de su vestido de crespón le proporcionó con toda probabilidad el control necesario. Lo cierto es que siguió inmóvil y dijo únicamente:

—Nunca sabré de usted. Y me olvidará por completo.

—No —dijo Dorothea—; no le olvidaré nunca. Nunca me olvido de nadie a quien he conocido. Tampoco ha habido multitudes en mi vida y no parece que vaya a haberlas de ahora en adelante. Y en Lowick tengo muchísimo sitio para los recuerdos, ¿no le parece? —Dorothea sonrió.

—¡Dios bendito! —estalló Will apasionadamente, alzándose, con el sombrero aún en la mano y llegándose a una mesa de mármol, donde se dio la vuelta de repente, apoyándose contra ella. Se le había subido la sangre a la cabeza y al cuello y parecía casi enfadado. Tenía la impresión de que los dos eran criaturas que se estaban convirtiendo lentamente en mármol el uno en presencia del otro, mientras sus corazones seguían latiendo y sus ojos se miraban anhelantes. Pero no había más remedio. Nunca hubiera podido justificar ante sí mismo que aquella entrevista a la que él había venido con una firme determinación, terminara con unas manifestaciones que pudieran interpretarse como un intento de conseguir la fortuna de la señora Casaubon. Además, era cierto que temía el efecto que semejante confesión pudiera tener sobre Dorothea.

Ella lo miró desde su asiento junto a la ventana con cierta preocupación, imaginando que quizá hubiese habido algo ofensivo en sus palabras. Al mismo tiempo fluían en su pensamiento ideas sobre el dinero que quizá Will necesitaba y sobre la imposibilidad en que se encontraba de ayudarlo. ¡Si su tío hubiese estado en Tipton Grange, quizá se podría haber hecho algo con su colaboración! Fue aquella preocupación por los problemas económicos de Will mientras ella conservaba el dinero que le pertenecía lo que la llevó a decir, al ver que Ladislaw seguía en silencio mirando hacia otro lado:

—Me pregunto si le gustaría quedarse con la miniatura que está en el piso alto… me refiero a la hermosa miniatura de su abuela. Creo que no estaría bien que yo la guardara si usted quisiera tenerla. Se le parece extraordinariamente.

—Es usted muy amable —dijo Will con irritación—. No; no tengo interés. No es muy consolador poseer el propio retrato. Lo sería más que otros quisieran tenerlo.

—Pensé que le gustaría mantener viva su memoria… Creí… —Dorothea se interrumpió un instante, al sugerirle de pronto su imaginación la conveniencia de no tocar la historia de la tía Julia— que sin duda le gustaría conservar su miniatura como recuerdo de familia.

—¿Por qué iba a tenerla, cuando carezco de todo lo demás? Un hombre con una maleta por único depósito ha de guardar los recuerdos en la cabeza.

Will hablaba al azar, dando únicamente rienda suelta a su mal humor; era un poco exasperante que se le ofreciera el retrato de su abuela en aquel momento. Dorothea se puso en pie y dijo, algo indignada y también con altivez:

—Es usted el más dichoso de los dos por no tener nada.

Will se asustó. Cualquiera que fuese el significado de aquellas palabras, el tono hacía que pareciesen una despedida; y abandonando el apoyo de la mesa, se acercó un poco a Dorothea. Sus ojos se encontraron, pero con una extraña seriedad inquisitiva. Algo separaba sus pensamientos y cada uno tenía que hacer conjeturas sobre lo que sucedía en los del otro. A Will no se le había ocurrido nunca que tuviera derechos sobre la herencia o las propiedades que estaban ahora en manos de Dorothea, y habría necesitado una larga explicación para entender los sentimientos de su interlocutora.

—Hasta hace muy poco nunca me había parecido una desgracia no tener nada —dijo—. Pero la pobreza puede ser tan odiosa como la lepra si nos separa de lo que más queremos.

Aquellas palabras tocaron a Dorothea en lo más vivo, logrando aplacarla, y las contestó en un tono de melancólico compañerismo.

—El dolor llega de muchas maneras. Hace dos años no me lo imaginaba siquiera… No me imaginaba el modo inesperado en que los contratiempos se presentan, nos atan de manos y nos hacen callar cuando querríamos hablar. Yo antes despreciaba a las mujeres por no tener más control sobre sus propias vidas y por no hacer cosas mejores. Me gustaba mucho hacer lo que yo quería pero casi he renunciado por completo a ello —concluyó, sonriendo con aire travieso.

—Yo no he renunciado a hacer lo que me gusta, pero lo consigo muy pocas veces —dijo Will. Se hallaba a dos metros de ella, con el pensamiento lleno de anhelos y resoluciones contradictorias… deseando alguna inequívoca prueba de que Dorothea lo amaba y temiendo, sin embargo, la posición en que esa prueba podría colocarlo—. Aquello que más queremos puede estar rodeado de condiciones intolerables.

En aquel momento entró Pratt y dijo:

—Sir James está en la biblioteca, señora.

—Dígale que pase —respondió Dorothea de inmediato.

Fue como si entre Will y ella se hubiese producido una descarga eléctrica. Cada uno sintió la resistencia que creaba el orgullo, y no se miraron mientras aguardaban la aparición de sir James.

Después de estrechar la mano de su cuñada, el baronet hizo la menor inclinación posible de cabeza en dirección a Ladislaw. Will le pagó con la misma moneda y luego, volviéndose hacia Dorothea, dijo:

—Tengo que decirle adiós, señora Casaubon; y es probable que por mucho tiempo.

Dorothea le tendió la mano y se despidió cordialmente. La sensación de que sir James estaba menospreciando a Will y comportándose descortésmente con él estimuló su actitud decidida y digna: no hubo el menor asomo de turbación en sus modales. Y cuando Ladislaw hubo salido de la habitación, Dorothea miró a sir James con tanta serenidad, diciendo: «¿Qué tal está Celia?», que el baronet se vio obligado a comportarse como si no estuviera molesto. ¿Y de qué habría servido comportarse de otra manera? De hecho, sir James rechazaba hasta tal punto la asociación, incluso mental, de Dorothea con Ladislaw, que habría preferido evitar cualquier manifestación externa de desagrado que implicara la existencia de tan enojosa posibilidad. Si alguien le hubiese preguntado el porqué de aquel aborrecimiento, no estoy segura de que al principio hubiera dicho algo más explícito o más preciso que «¡ese Ladislaw!»… aunque al reflexionar podría haber argüido que el codicilo del señor Casaubon, al penalizar el posible matrimonio de Dorothea con Will, bastaba para convertir en impropia cualquier relación entre los dos. Su repugnancia era aún mayor porque se sentía imposibilitado para intervenir.

Pero sir James tenía poder de una manera que él mismo no sospechaba. Al presentarse en aquel momento, había sido la encarnación de las razones de más peso para que el orgullo de Will se convirtiera en fuerza repelente, que lo mantendría lejos de Dorothea.

Capítulo LV

¿Que tenía defectos? Me gustaría que también los tuvieras tú.
Son el afrutado mosto del más robusto vino;
o quizá el fuego regenerador
que ha convertido la densa materia negra
en cristalino sendero para el sol.

Si la juventud es la estación de la esperanza, con frecuencia lo es solo porque nuestros mayores han puesto sus esperanzas en nosotros; porque ninguna edad está tan dispuesta como la juventud a pensar que sus emociones, despedidas y decisiones son las últimas de su especie. Cualquier crisis parece definitiva, simplemente porque es nueva. Nos cuentan que a los más viejos habitantes del Perú nunca dejan de afectarles los terremotos, pero probablemente ven más allá de cada temblor de tierra y reflexionan sobre los muchos que aún habrán de producirse.

A Dorothea, todavía en esa época de la juventud en la que los ojos, con sus largas y espesas pestañas, vuelven, después de una lluvia de lágrimas, a estar tan limpios y lozanos como una pasionaria recién abierta, la despedida de aquella mañana le pareció señalar el fin de sus relaciones personales con Will, que se marchaba hacia una ignota lejanía de años y que si alguna vez regresaba lo haría convertido en un hombre distinto. Su verdadero estado de ánimo —la orgullosa resolución de cortar de raíz cualquier sospecha de que estuviese dispuesto a encarnar al aventurero menesteroso en busca de una esposa rica— era algo que Dorothea no podía imaginar, por lo que interpretó su comportamiento sin gran dificultad, suponiendo que el codicilo del señor Casaubon le parecía, igual que a ella, la prohibición vulgar y cruel de que existiera una activa amistad entre los dos. El deleite juvenil que experimentaban al hablarse y decirse el uno al otro lo que a nadie más le interesaría oír, se había acabado para siempre, convirtiéndose en un tesoro del pasado. Por esa misma razón Dorothea se complacía en recordarlo sin la menor reserva interior. Aquella felicidad singular también había muerto y en su silenciosa y oscura cámara mortuoria Dorothea podía dar rienda suelta a un apasionado dolor del que ella misma se sorprendía. Por vez primera descolgó la miniatura de la pared y la observó de cerca, fundiendo gustosa a aquella mujer tan severa y excesivamente juzgada con el nieto a quien ella defendía con el corazón y con la cabeza. ¿Es que cualquiera que haya disfrutado de la ternura femenina podrá reprocharle a Dorothea que cogiera el pequeño retrato oval haciéndole un lecho en la palma de la mano y apoyara la mejilla contra él, como si su gesto pudiera aliviar el dolor de dos criaturas injustamente condenadas? No supo que, por un breve instante, era el amor lo que había llegado hasta ella, como en un sueño antes de despertar, con los colores de la mañana en sus alas… que era al amor a quien estaba diciendo adiós entre sollozos, mientras su imagen quedaba borrada por el rigor imparcial del tiempo implacable. Dorothea sintió tan solo que había perdido algo de manera irrevocable, y sus ideas sobre el futuro pudieron por ello cristalizar con mayor facilidad en resoluciones. Las almas ardientes, dispuestas a construir su vida futura, son propensas a comprometerse en la realización de sus propias visiones.

Un día que Dorothea fue a Freshitt Hall para cumplir su promesa de quedarse toda la noche y ver bañar al bebé, la señora Cadwallader los acompañó durante la cena, por haber emprendido el rector una de sus excursiones de pesca. La tarde era calurosa, e incluso en el agradable salón, bajo cuya ventana abierta el césped antiguo y lustroso descendía suavemente hacia el estanque de los lirios y hacia unos montículos bien ajardinados, la temperatura era lo bastante alta para que Celia, con su vestido blanco de muselina y sus

bucles sueltos, reflexionase compadecida sobre lo incómoda que se sentiría Dodo con su traje negro y su toca ceñida. Pero solo habló de ello cuando concluyeron algunos de los ritos relacionados con el bebé y su espíritu disfrutó de cierta tranquilidad. Después de sentarse, llevaba ya algún tiempo abanicándose cuando dijo, con su voz tranquila y un poco gutural:

—Dodo, querida, haz el favor de quitarte esa toca. Estoy segura de que debes de estar a punto de asfixiarte con ese vestido.

—Ya me he acostumbrado a llevarla… Se ha convertido en un especie de concha —dijo Dorothea sonriendo—. Me siento más bien desprotegida cuando me la quito.

—No soporto verte con ella; nos das calor a todos —dijo Celia, dejando el abanico y acercándose a Dorothea. Fue una bonita escena ver a aquella dama menuda con su vestido blanco de muselina quitándole la toca de viuda a su hermana, más majestuosa, y dejándola sobre una silla. Precisamente en el momento en que los rizos y trenzas de color castaño oscuro quedaban al descubierto, sir James entró en la habitación. El baronet contempló la cabeza liberada y dejó escapar un «¡ah!» de satisfacción.

—Lo he hecho yo, James —dijo Celia—. Dodo no tiene por qué ser tan esclava de su luto; no hace falta que lleve más esa toca estando en familia.

—Mi querida Celia —dijo lady Chettam—, una viuda debe llevar luto por lo menos un año.

—No si se casa antes —dijo la señora Cadwallader, que experimentaba cierto placer asustando a su buena amiga, la madre de sir James. El baronet se sintió molesto y se inclinó hacia adelante para jugar con el perro maltés de Celia.

—Eso no sucede con frecuencia, espero —dijo lady Chettam, en un tono destinado a precaverse ante tales acontecimientos—. Ninguna de nuestras amistades se ha comprometido de esa forma con la excepción de la señora Beevor, y a lord Grinsell le resultó muy penoso. Su primer marido era una persona desagradable, lo que hizo que la sorpresa resultase aún mayor. Y fue duramente castigada por ello. Dicen que el capitán Beevor la arrastraba tirándole del pelo y llegó a amenazarla con una pistola cargada.

—¡No tiene nada de extraño, si eligió mal! —dijo la señora Cadwallader, que estaba de un humor decididamente travieso—. El matrimonio así es malo siempre, tanto el primero como el segundo. Ser el primero es muy poca recomendación para un marido si no tiene otras prendas. Yo preferiría un segundo marido bueno a un primero malo.

—Querida mía, a veces se deja usted llevar por esa lengua suya tan inteligente —dijo lady Chettam—. Estoy convencida de que sería la última mujer que se casara de manera prematura si Dios se llevara a nuestro querido rector.

—Yo no prometo nada; podría ser una economía necesaria. Volverse a casar es legal, creo yo; de lo contrario podríamos ser hindúes en lugar de cristianos. Por supuesto si una mujer acepta a un hombre que no le conviene, tiene que sufrir las consecuencias, y si lo hace dos veces se merece todo lo que le pase. Pero si puede casarse con un hombre de buena cuna, de buena presencia y de probado valor… cuanto antes mejor.

—Creo que el tema de nuestra conversación está muy mal elegido —dijo sir James, con expresión de desagrado—. ¿Por qué no hablamos de otra cosa?

—No lo hagan por mí, sir James —intervino Dorothea, decidida a no perder la oportunidad de librarse de ciertas referencias indirectas a excelentes partidos—. Si habla usted en mi nombre, le aseguro que ningún tema me resulta más indiferente e impersonal que un segundo matrimonio. Es como si hablaran ustedes de mujeres que van a las cacerías de zorros: tanto si es admirable que lo hagan como si no, no tengo intención de imitarlas. Por favor, deje que la señora Cadwallader se divierta con ese tema tanto como con cualquier otro.

—Mi querida señora Casaubon —dijo lady Chettam, con su tono más majestuoso—, espero que no pensará usted que hacía alusiones personales al mencionar a la señora Beevor. Se trata tan solo de un ejemplo que se me ha ocurrido. Era hijastra de lord Grinsell; él se casó en segundas nupcias con la señora Teveroy. No la aludía a usted en absoluto.

—No, claro que no —dijo Celia—. Nadie ha escogido el tema; todo salió de la toca de Dodo. La señora Cadwallader solo ha dicho una cosa que es muy cierta. Nadie se puede casar llevando una toca de viuda, James.

—¡Calla, querida! —dijo la señora Cadwallader—. No tengo intención de ofender otra vez. Ni siquiera mencionaré a Dido y a Zenobia. Pero ¿de qué vamos a hablar si no? Por mi parte, no soy partidaria de un debate sobre la naturaleza humana, que es la naturaleza de las esposas de los rectores.

Más tarde, después de que la señora Cadwallader se hubiera marchado, Celia le dijo en privado a Dorothea:

—La verdad, Dodo, quitarte la toca ha hecho que vuelvas a ser tú misma por más de un motivo. Has hablado sin pelos en la lengua como solías hacerlo cuando se decía algo que te molestaba. Pero no he logrado averiguar si el culpable ha sido James o la señora Cadwallader.

—Ninguno de los dos —dijo Dorothea—. James intervino por delicadeza hacia mí, pero se equivocaba al suponer que me importaba lo que decía la señora Cadwallader. Solo me importaría si hubiera alguna ley que me obligara a aceptar un partido con buena cuna y buena presencia que ella u otra persona recomendaran.

—Pero, Dodo, es cierto que, si alguna vez volvieras a casarte, sería mejor que a tu marido no le faltara nobleza y que fuese bien parecido —dijo Celia, considerando que el señor Casaubon no había estado demasiado bien provisto de aquellas dos cualidades y que no estaría de más prevenir a Dorothea a tiempo.

—No te preocupes, Kitty; tengo ideas bien distintas sobre lo que me conviene. Nunca volveré a casarme —dijo Dorothea, acariciando la barbilla de su hermana y contemplándola con afecto lleno de indulgencia. Celia estaba acunando a su niño y Dorothea había ido a darle las buenas noches.

—¿De verdad… completamente decidida? —dijo Celia—. ¿Nadie en absoluto… aunque fuese realmente maravilloso?

Dorothea movió despacio la cabeza.

—Nadie en absoluto. Tengo proyectos estupendos. Me gustaría adquirir una gran extensión de tierra, drenarla y hacer una pequeña colonia, donde todo el mundo trabajase y donde todo el trabajo se hiciera bien. Yo conocería a todas las personas y sería amiga suya. Voy a celebrar largas conferencias con el señor Garth: él me puede decir casi todo lo que quiero saber.

—Entonces, si tienes un proyecto serás feliz, Dodo —dijo Celia—. Quizá al pequeño Arthur le gusten los proyectos cuando crezca, y pueda ayudarte.

Sir James fue informado aquella misma noche de que Dorothea estaba decidida de verdad a no casarse con nadie, e iba a patrocinar «proyectos de todo tipo», exactamente como solía hacer en otros tiempos. De acuerdo con sus convicciones más íntimas, el baronet consideraba que había algo repulsivo en el segundo matrimonio de una mujer, y ningún posible enlace de su cuñada le impediría verlo como una especie de profanación de Dorothea. Se daba cuenta de que el mundo juzgaría absurdo aquel sentimiento, sobre todo tratándose de una mujer de veintiún años, ya que los usos «del mundo» eran dar por seguro el segundo matrimonio de una viuda joven y como probable su próxima celebración y sonreír significativamente si la viuda obraba de acuerdo con tales predicciones. Pero en el caso de que Dorothea decidiera casarse con la soledad, sir James estaba convencido de que sería la decisión más indicada.

Capítulo LVI

Cuán feliz ha nacido y se ha educado
aquel que a otra voluntad no sirve;
cuya armadura son sus honestos pensamientos,
y la verdad más simple su única destreza

Tal hombre queda libre de vínculos serviles
o de esperanza de ascender, o de miedo a caer;
señor de sí mismo aunque no de tierras;
y que, sin tener nada, lo tiene todo.

SIR HENRY WOTTON

La confianza de Dorothea en los conocimientos de Caleb Garth, que se remontaba a cuando supo que aprobaba su proyecto de viviendas, aumentó muy rápidamente durante su estancia en Freshitt, ya que sir James la convenció para que recorriera las dos propiedades acompañándolos a ambos; el señor Garth respondía con la misma moneda a su admiración, y le dijo a su mujer que la señora Casaubon tenía una cabeza para los negocios nada frecuente en una mujer. Debe recordarse que con la palabra «negocios» Caleb no aludía nunca a las transacciones monetarias, sino a la competente dedicación a una tarea.

—¡Nada frecuente! —repetía Caleb—. Ha dicho una cosa que yo pensaba con frecuencia cuando era muchacho: «Señor Garth, me gustaría poder recordar, si llego a vieja, que he hecho mejoras en una gran extensión de tierra y que he construido muchas viviendas de buena calidad, porque se trata de un trabajo que es sano mientras se hace y porque, después de hacerlo, los hombres se convierten en mejores personas». Esas fueron sus palabras: esa es la forma que tiene de ver las cosas.

—De una manera femenina, espero —dijo la señora Garth, sospechando a medias que quizá la señora Casaubon no se atuviera al principio natural de la subordinación.

—¡Puedes estar segura! —dijo Caleb, moviendo la cabeza—. Te gustaría oírla hablar, Susan. Utiliza unas palabras muy sencillas y tiene una voz que parece música. ¡Qué digo!, me recuerda a trozos del *Mesías*… «e inmediatamente apareció un ejército de la milicia celestial, alabando a Dios y diciendo…»; el tono de su voz da satisfacción a cualquier oído.

Caleb era muy aficionado a la música y cuando se lo podía permitir iba a oír un oratorio que se interpretara por los alrededores; luego volvía a casa con una profunda reverencia a su grandiosa estructura tonal, que le hacía sentarse con gesto meditabundo, mirando al suelo, y lanzando al aire muchas frases ininteligibles con los brazos extendidos.

Dadas sus excelentes relaciones, era lógico que Dorothea le pidiera que se ocupase de las tres granjas y las numerosas viviendas ligadas a Lowick Manor; de manera que las esperanzas de Caleb de conseguir trabajo para dos ya se estaban haciendo realidad. Como él decía, «los negocios engendran más negocios». Y una forma de negocio que estaba empezando a procrear en aquellos momentos era la construcción de ferrocarriles. Una de las líneas en proyecto atravesaría la parroquia de Lowick, donde el ganado había pastado hasta entonces con una paz no alterada por el asombro; y así sucedió que los primeros combates para la creación de una red ferroviaria se mezclaron con los asuntos de Caleb Garth y decidieron el curso de esta historia afectando a dos personas que le eran muy queridas.

El ferrocarril submarino puede que tenga sus dificultades; pero el centro del mar no está dividido entre

diferentes terratenientes que reclaman daños sentimentales además de cuantitativamente mensurables. En la circunscripción del condado a la que pertenecía Middlemarch, el ferrocarril era un tema de conversación tan interesante como la ley de la reforma electoral o los inminentes horrores del cólera, y quienes manifestaban las opiniones más decididas eran las mujeres y los terratenientes. Entre las representantes del sexo femenino, tanto maduras como jóvenes, se consideraba atrevido y peligroso viajar en máquinas de vapor y argumentaban en contra diciendo que nada las induciría a subirse a un vagón de ferrocarril; los propietarios, por su parte, aunque diferían en sus razonamientos tanto como Solomon Featherstone se diferenciaba de lord Medlicote, opinaban unánimemente que al vender tierras, tanto si se trataba del Enemigo de la humanidad como de una compañía obligada a comprar, aquellas perniciosas entidades tendrían que pagar un precio muy alto por el permiso para hacer daño a la raza humana.

Las personas de ingenio más tardo, como el señor Solomon y la señora Waule, ambos propietarios de las tierras que ocupaban, precisaron de mucho tiempo para llegar a aquella conclusión, porque sus pensamientos quedaban detenidos en la vívida imagen de lo que significaría cortar en dos la Gran Dehesa, convirtiéndola en dos parcelas con tres esquinas, que no serían nada en absoluto; mientras que los puentes para pasar de un lado a otro y los elevados precios de compra parecían remotos e increíbles.

—Si el ferrocarril atraviesa El Predio, las vacas perderán todas las crías, hermano —dijo la señora Waule, con tono profundamente melancólico—; y no me sorprendería que eso le pasara también a la yegua si estuviese preñada. Es bien triste que se destroce la propiedad de una viuda sin que la justicia abra la boca. ¿Quién va a impedir que corten a diestro y siniestro una vez que empiecen? Todo el mundo sabe que yo no puedo luchar.

—Lo mejor sería no decir nada y tener a alguien preparado para que los eche con cajas destempladas cuando vengan espiando y midiendo —dijo Solomon—. La gente, por lo que tengo entendido, hizo eso en Brassing. La explicación de que se ven forzados a tomar este camino no es más que una excusa, si quieres saber la verdad. Que se vayan con sus particiones a otra parroquia. Y no creo que el dinero compense por traer a un puñado de rufianes a pisotearte las cosechas. Además, ¿dónde tiene el bolsillo una compañía?

—El hermano Peter, que Dios lo perdone, sacó dinero de una compañía —dijo la señora Waule—. Pero aquello fue por el manganeso. No era para que un ferrocarril te hiciera pedazos a tontas y a locas.

—Bueno, una cosa es cierta, Jane —concluyó el señor Solomon, bajando la voz de manera cautelosa—, cuantas más trabas les pongamos, más nos pagarán por dejarlos seguir, si es que tienen que venir a pesar de todo.

Aquel razonamiento del señor Solomon era quizá menos perfecto de lo que él se imaginaba, ya que, por lo que se refiere al trazado del ferrocarril, su astucia resultaba tan valiosa como la habilidad de un diplomático ante el enfriamiento general o el catarro del sistema solar. Pero se dispuso a poner por obra sus ideas de manera totalmente diplomática, azuzando las sospechas. Solomon vivía en la zona de Lowick que quedaba más apartada del centro del pueblo, y las casas de los jornaleros o eran viviendas aisladas o formaban parte de una aldehuela llamada Frick, donde un molino de agua y algunas canteras creaban un pequeño centro de pausada laboriosidad muy ligada al esfuerzo físico.

Al faltar una idea precisa sobre la naturaleza de los ferrocarriles, la opinión pública de Frick les era adversa, porque en aquel rincón cubierto de hierba la mente humana carecía de la proverbial tendencia a admirar lo desconocido, suponiendo más bien que había de ser contrario a los intereses de los pobres y que la desconfianza era la única actitud juiciosa para examinarlo. Ni siquiera el rumor de la reforma despertó esperanzas milenaristas en Frick, ya que no había en ello ninguna promesa concreta, como salvado gratis para engordar al cerdo de Hiram Ford, o un tabernero de Las Pesas y Balanzas que fabricara cerveza gratis, o una oferta por parte de los tres granjeros más próximos para subir los jornales durante el invierno. Y sin ventajas claras de este tipo entre sus promesas, la reforma parecía hallarse al mismo nivel que las baladronadas de los vendedores ambulantes, que eran una invitación a la desconfianza para cualquier persona un poco entendida. Los vecinos de Frick no pasaban hambre y eran menos dados al fanatismo que a ver las cosas con una fuerte dosis de desconfianza; menos inclinados a creer que el cielo se preocupaba especialmente por ellos que a mirarlo más bien como dispuesto a engañarlos… una disposición observable incluso en los rigores mismos del clima.

La mentalidad de Frick, en consecuencia, era la idónea para que Solomon Featherstone se pusiera a trabajar en ella, ya que tenía ideas mucho más fértiles de la misma especie, con una desconfianza en los cielos y en la tierra mucho mejor alimentada y con más horas de ocio a su disposición. Solomon era en aquella época supervisor de carreteras y, a lomos de su despaciosa jaca, hacía con frecuencia visitas a Frick para ver a los trabajadores sacando las piedras de las canteras, deteniéndose con misteriosa premeditación, cosa que podría haber llevado a cualquiera a suponer equivocadamente que tenía, para quedarse allí,

alguna razón distinta de la mera ausencia de impulso para moverse. Después de contemplar mucho tiempo cualquier trabajo que se estuviera realizando, alzaba un poco los ojos y contemplaba el horizonte; luego agitaba por fin la brida, tocaba al caballo con la fusta y reanudaba lentamente la marcha. La manilla de las horas era rápida comparada con Solomon, que tenía el agradable convencimiento de que podía permitirse ser lento. También solía detenerse a mantener una conversación cautelosa y un tanto intrigante con cada obrero que se encontraba en el camino reparando cercas y cavando zanjas, y estaba siempre dispuesto a escuchar incluso noticias que ya había oído antes, sintiéndose con ventaja sobre todos los narradores por el hecho de creerles solo en parte. Un día, sin embargo, inició un diálogo con Hiram Ford, un carretero, durante el cual el mismo Solomon facilitó parte de la información. El señor Featherstone quería saber si Hiram había visto individuos con estacas y otros instrumentos espiando por los alrededores: se llamaban a sí mismos empleados del ferrocarril, pero a saber lo que eran en realidad, o qué era lo que querían hacer. Lo menos que pretendían era dividir la parroquia de Lowick en mil pedazos.

—¡Vaya! Entonces no habrá manera de ir de un sitio a otro —dijo Hiram, pensando en su carro y en sus caballos.

—Claro que no —dijo Solomon—. ¡Y hacer pedazos tierra buena como la de esta parroquia! Que se vayan a Tipton, digo yo. A saber qué es lo que se esconde detrás de todo eso. Quieren justificarlo con el tráfico; pero seguro que será malo para la tierra y a la larga para la gente pobre.

—Seguro que son tipos de Londres —dijo Hiram, que tenía una vaga idea de la capital como centro de hostilidad contra el campo.

—No le quepa la menor duda. Y en algunos sitios cerca de Brassing, por lo que he oído, la gente se echó sobre ellos cuando estaban espiando, les rompió los chismes que llevan para mirar y los obligó a marcharse, así que lo pensarán dos veces antes de volver.

—Apuesto cualquier cosa a que fue muy divertido —dijo Hiram, cuyas diversiones se veían muy limitadas por las circunstancias.

—Bueno, yo no me enfrentaría con ellos personalmente —dijo Solomon—. Algunos dicen que los buenos tiempos han pasado ya, y la prueba está en ver cómo nos invaden esos tipos que lo pisotean todo y quieren despedazar la tierra para hacer ferrocarriles; luego el tráfico grande se tragará al chico y no quedará un solo tiro en toda la zona, ni un látigo que restallar.

—Ya me encargaré yo de restallarles el látigo en las orejas, antes de que lleguen a eso —dijo Hiram, mientras el señor Solomon, dando un tirón de la brida, se ponía otra vez en marcha.

Las simientes de las ortigas no necesitan cuidados para fructificar. La ruina de aquellos campos por causa del ferrocarril se discutió no solo en Las Pesas y Balanzas, sino en los campos de heno, donde la abundancia estival de jornaleros daba unas oportunidades para cambiar impresiones que surgían muy pocas veces durante el año agrícola.

Una mañana, no mucho tiempo después de la entrevista entre el señor Farebrother y Mary Garth, en la que esta última había confesado al vicario sus sentimientos por Fred Vincy, sucedió que Caleb tuvo unos asuntos que lo llevaron a la granja de Yoddrell, en dirección a Frick: se trataba de medir y valorar un campo muy distante que pertenecía a Lowick Manor y que el señor Garth pensaba vender ventajosamente en beneficio de Dorothea (hay que confesar que el padre de Mary era partidario de obtener los mejores precios posibles de las compañías de ferrocarriles). Caleb dejó la calesa en la granja de Yoddrell y al dirigirse a pie con su ayudante y con la cinta de agrimensor al escenario de su trabajo, se encontró con el grupo de empleados de la compañía que estaban ajustando su nivel de burbuja. Después de charlar unos momentos los dejó, comentando que a la larga lo volverían a alcanzar en el sitio donde iba a hacer sus mediciones. Era una de esas mañanas grises que después de una lluvia ligera resultan deliciosas hacia mediodía, cuando las nubes se abren un poco y, a lo largo de los senderos y junto a los setos vivos, la tierra húmeda despide su fragancia.

Fred Vincy, a caballo por aquellos parajes, habría advertido mejor la fragancia de la tierra si no le hubiesen preocupado tanto sus inútiles esfuerzos por imaginarse qué era lo que podía hacer, con su padre por un lado esperando que se ordenara sin más dilaciones, Mary por el otro, amenazando con abandonarlo si lo hacía, y sin que el mundo del trabajo se interesara por un joven caballero sin capital ni especialización de ningún tipo. Todo aquello le resultaba aún más duro porque su padre, satisfecho al verlo dispuesto a sentar la cabeza, estaba muy afectuoso con él y le había propuesto que se diera aquel agradable paseo para ocuparse de la compra de unos galgos. Cuando decidiera lo que debía hacer, aún le quedaría la tarea de contárselo a su padre. Pero hay que reconocer que la elección de su ocupación futura, tarea primordial, era lo más difícil: ¿qué posible ocupación secular existía para un joven (cuya familia no podía conseguirle un «nombramiento») que fuese propia para un caballero, a la vez que lucrativa, y que pudiera emprenderse sin

ningún conocimiento especial? A caballo por los senderos cercanos a Frick en aquel estado de ánimo, Fred aflojó el paso mientras reflexionaba sobre la conveniencia de dar un rodeo para pasar por la rectoría de Lowick y visitar a Mary; desde donde se encontraba podía ver por encima de los setos los distintos campos que se extendían a su alrededor. De repente un ruido atrajo su atención y vio, en la parte más distante de un campo a su izquierda, a seis o siete hombres con bieldos en las manos acercándose en actitud hostil a los cuatro empleados de la compañía del ferrocarril que les hacían frente, mientras Caleb Garth y su ayudante cruzaban a toda prisa el campo para reunirse con el grupo amenazado. Fred, obstaculizado unos momentos en su avance por la necesidad de encontrar el portón, no pudo llegar galopando al lugar de la acción antes de que los jornaleros, cuyo trabajo de airear el heno se había desarrollado a un ritmo más bien reposado después de tomarse la cerveza del mediodía, hicieran retroceder a los empleados con sus bieldos; mientras, el ayudante de Caleb Garth, un chico de diecisiete años, que se apoderó del nivel de burbuja al ordenárselo su jefe, había sido derribado y se hallaba al parecer inconsciente. Los hombres de la compañía tenían ventaja a la hora de correr, y Fred les cubrió la retirada colocándose frente a los jornaleros y abalanzándose sobre ellos con rapidez suficiente para desbaratar su persecución.

—¿Qué demonios os proponéis, malditos imbéciles? —gritó Fred, persiguiendo al grupo ya dividido haciendo zigzags y agitando la fusta de un lado para otro—. Os denunciaré a todos ante el magistrado. Juraré que habéis derribado al muchacho y lo habéis matado. Os condenarán a todos a la horca en la próxima sesión del tribunal como no tengáis cuidado —dijo Fred, que reía después de buena gana al recordar sus palabras. Los trabajadores se habían visto ya obligados a cruzar la cerca para volver a su henar y Fred había frenado el caballo cuando Hiram Ford, al ver que los separaba una prudente distancia, se volvió y gritó a grandes voces un desafío de cuyo carácter homérico no se percataba en absoluto.

—Es usted un cobarde, claro que sí. Apéese del caballo, señorito, y verá cómo le bajo los humos. No se atreverá a venir sin el caballo ni la fusta. Venga y ya verá cómo le rompo la crisma.

—Espera un momento a que vuelva y me pelearé con todos por turno, si es eso lo que queréis —dijo Fred, que tenía confianza en la experiencia adquirida boxeando con sus compañeros en la universidad. Pero en aquel preciso momento quería volver cuanto antes junto a Caleb y el muchacho caído.

El ayudante del señor Garth se había torcido un tobillo y le dolía mucho, pero no tenía ninguna otra herida; Fred lo montó en su caballo para que fuera a la finca de Yoddrell, donde podrían curarlo.

—Déjales que metan al caballo en el establo y di a los agrimensores que pueden volver a por sus bártulos —le explicó Fred—. Ya no tienen nada que temer.

—No, no —dijo Caleb—, aquí hay un instrumento roto. No les quedará más remedio que renunciar por hoy, y más vale así. Ten, pon su equipo delante de ti sobre el caballo, Tom. Te verán venir y se volverán.

—Me alegro de haber estado aquí en el momento oportuno, señor Garth —dijo Fred, mientras Tom se alejaba—. Quién sabe lo que podría haber pasado si no llega a tiempo la caballería.

—Ha sido una suerte, desde luego —dijo Caleb, hablando con aire más bien ausente y mirando hacia el sitio donde él estaba trabajando en el momento de la interrupción—. Pero… maldita sea, eso es lo que pasa cuando la gente es tan estúpida… Tengo que interrumpir mi trabajo de hoy. No puedo seguir adelante sin alguien que me ayude con la cinta de medir. ¡Qué le vamos a hacer! —Había echado ya a andar con expresión de contrariedad, como olvidado de la presencia de Fred, cuando de repente se volvió y dijo muy deprisa—: ¿Tienes algo que hacer hoy, muchacho?

—Nada, señor Garth. Le ayudaré con mucho gusto… ¿puedo? —dijo Fred, con la sensación de que cortejaría a Mary mientras ayudaba a su padre.

—Bueno, si no te importa agacharte y pasar calor.

—No me importa nada. Pero antes quiero ir a vérmelas con ese tipo corpulento que se ha vuelto para desafiarme. Le voy a dar una buena lección. No tardaré más de cinco minutos.

—¡Tonterías! —dijo Caleb, con su entonación más autoritaria—. Iré yo a hablar con ellos. No es más que ignorancia. Alguien ha estado contándoles mentiras. Y esos pobres estúpidos no son capaces de darse cuenta.

—Entonces le acompañaré —dijo Fred.

—No, no; quédate donde estás. No necesito tus entusiasmos juveniles. Me basto yo solo.

Caleb era un hombre muy fuerte y apenas sabía lo que era el miedo, excepto el temor a hacer daño a otros y a tener que pronunciar discursos. En aquel momento, sin embargo, sintió que era su deber lanzar una pequeña arenga a los jornaleros. Se daba en él una mezcla sorprendente —que nacía de haber sido siempre muy trabajador— de ideas muy rigurosas sobre los trabajadores y de indulgencia en su trato con ellos. Una buena jornada de trabajo, y de trabajo bien hecho, le parecía que formaba parte del bienestar de cualquier asalariado, como lo era, y muy importante, de su felicidad personal; pero también tenía un

sentido muy arraigado de la camaradería. Cuando se dirigió hacia ellos, los jornaleros no se habían reintegrado aún al trabajo, y permanecían inmóviles en esa forma de agrupación rural que consiste en estar medio vueltos de espaldas entre sí, a una distancia de dos o tres metros. Todos miraron hoscamente a Caleb, que avanzó deprisa, con una mano en el bolsillo y la otra metida entre los botones del chaleco y que aún mantenía su aire amable de siempre cuando, por fin, se detuvo entre ellos.

—Vamos a ver, muchachos, ¿qué es todo esto? —empezó, utilizando como de costumbre frases cortas, que a él le parecían llenas de sentido, por las muchas ideas que encerraban, como las abundantes raíces de una planta que solo consigue sacar la cabeza fuera del agua—. ¿Cómo habéis cometido una equivocación tan grande? Alguien os ha contado mentiras. Creíais que esos hombres os iban a hacer daño.

Una especie de gruñido monosilábico fue la respuesta, a mayor o menor distancia de la pregunta, según los casos, de acuerdo con la lentitud de los respectivos procesos mentales.

—¡Tonterías! ¡Nadie va a haceros daño! Están viendo qué camino tiene que seguir el ferrocarril. Y daos cuenta, muchachos, de que no podéis impedir que se haga la vía férrea: se hará tanto si os gusta como si no. Y si seguís luchando contra ella, solo os acarreará problemas. La ley da permiso a esos hombres para venir aquí. El propietario no puede decir nada en contra y, si os entrometéis, os las tendréis que ver con el alguacil y con el juez Blakesley, y también con la cárcel de Middlemarch y con que os lleven allí esposados. Y eso es lo que os podría pasar ahora mismo si alguien os denunciara.

Caleb hizo entonces una pausa, y tal vez ni el más consumado orador podría haber escogido mejor ni el momento de la pausa ni el tenor de sus imágenes.

—Estoy seguro de que no queríais hacer ningún daño. Alguien os ha dicho que el ferrocarril es una cosa mala. Es mentira. Puede que haga un poquito de daño aquí y allí, en esto y en lo otro; lo mismo pasa con el sol que está en el cielo. Pero el ferrocarril es una buena cosa.

—¡Claro! Bueno para que los peces gordos hagan dinero —dijo el viejo Timothy Cooper, que se había quedado aireando el heno mientras los otros hacían su escapada—; he visto muchas cosas desde que era joven: la guerra y la paz, y los canales, y el viejo rey Jorge, y el regente, y el segundo rey Jorge… y el último rey, que tiene un nombre distinto… y todo sigue igual para los pobres. ¿De qué les han servido los canales? No les han traído ni carne, ni tocino, ni dinero que guardar, como no lo ahorraran muriéndose de hambre. Los tiempos no han hecho más que empeorar para los pobres desde que yo era joven. Y lo mismo pasará con los ferrocarriles. Solo servirán para empeorar la situación de los pobres. Pero los que se entremeten son unos estúpidos y eso es lo que les he dicho a estos mozos. El mundo es de los peces gordos y no hay más que hablar. Y usted está con los peces gordos, señor Garth, de eso no hay la menor duda.

Timothy era un viejo jornalero nervudo, de una especie que aún sobrevivía en aquellos tiempos: con los ahorros en un calcetín, viviendo en una cabaña solitaria, dispuesto a no dejarse convencer por ningún alarde oratorio y con tan poco espíritu feudal y tan poca fe como si no desconociera por completo ni la Edad de la Razón ni los Derechos del Hombre. Caleb se enfrentaba con un problema conocido por cualquier persona que haya tratado de razonar, en épocas de oscurantismo y sin la colaboración de algún milagro, con gentes del campo que se hallan en posesión de una verdad irrefutable, conocida a través de un duro proceso emocional, y que pueden dejar caer como un garrote de gigante sobre un razonamiento pulcramente cincelado en favor de unos beneficios sociales de los que ellas no tienen la menor constancia. Caleb, aunque hubiese querido, era incapaz de echar mano de la hipocresía, y se había acostumbrado a hacer frente a aquel tipo de dificultades por el simple método de cumplir fielmente sus obligaciones.

—Da lo mismo que no tengas buena opinión de mí, Tim —fue su respuesta—; eso ahora carece de importancia. Quizá las cosas estén mal para la gente pobre; pero quiero que estos muchachos no hagan algo que sirva para empeorar aún más su situación. Quizá el ganado lleve una carga muy pesada, pero no le servirá de nada tirarla en la cuneta cuando se trata en parte de sus propios piensos.

—Solo queríamos divertirnos un poco —dijo Hiram, que estaba empezando a ver las posibles consecuencias de su escapada—. Nada más.

—De acuerdo, prometed que no volveréis a hacerlo y yo me encargaré de que nadie os denuncie.

—Yo no he intervenido y no voy a prometer nada —dijo Timothy.

—Tú no, pero los demás sí. Vamos, hoy tengo tanto trabajo como cualquiera de vosotros y poco tiempo que perder. Prometed que vais a portaros bien sin necesidad de llamar al alguacil.

—No nos entremeteremos… Por nosotros que hagan lo que quieran —fueron las fórmulas del compromiso que Caleb consiguió; y luego se apresuró a volver junto a Fred, que lo había seguido y se quedó contemplándolo desde el portón.

Se pusieron a trabajar y Fred colaboró con energía. Estaba de mucho mejor humor y se rio de buena gana al dar un resbalón en la tierra húmeda y mancharse sus perfectos pantalones de verano. ¿Era el éxito

de su arremetida lo que le había animado, o la satisfacción de ayudar al padre de Mary? Algo más. Los incidentes de la mañana habían colaborado con su frustrada imaginación para dar forma a un trabajo profesional que poseía diversos atractivos. No estoy segura de que ciertas fibras de la mente del señor Garth no hubiesen reanudado su antigua vibración orientada hacia el mismo fin que ahora Fred empezaba a vislumbrar. Porque el accidente eficaz no es más que la chispa que salta allí donde hay aceite y estopa; y a Fred siempre le pareció que fue el ferrocarril quien añadió el toque necesario. Pero ambos siguieron trabajando sin intercambiar otras palabras que las exigidas por la tarea que realizaban. Por fin, cuando hubieron terminado y se marchaban ya, el señor Garth dijo:

—Un chico joven no necesita una licenciatura para hacer este tipo de trabajo, ¿eh, Fred?

—Ojalá me hubiese dedicado a él antes de pensar en una licenciatura —respondió Fred. Hizo una pausa y luego añadió, más indeciso—: ¿Cree que soy demasiado viejo para aprender su negocio, señor Garth?

—Mi negocio tiene muchas facetas, muchacho —dijo el señor Garth, sonriendo—. Una buena parte de lo que sé solo se adquiere con la experiencia: no se puede aprender como se aprenden las cosas leyéndolas en un libro. Pero tú eres aún lo bastante joven para poner los cimientos. —Caleb pronunció aquella última frase recalcando mucho las palabras, aunque después hizo una pausa, un tanto dubitativo. Últimamente tenía la impresión de que Fred estaba decidido a entrar en la Iglesia.

—¿Cree usted que no lo haría del todo mal si lo intentara? —preguntó Fred con mayor vehemencia.

—Eso depende —dijo Caleb, apartando un poco la mirada y bajando la voz, con el aire de un hombre convencido de estar diciendo algo profundamente religioso—. Has de estar seguro de dos cosas: la primera es amar el trabajo y no estar siempre mirando por encima de la valla, deseando que empiece el juego. Y la segunda no avergonzarte de lo que haces y pensar que sería más honroso para ti dedicarte a algo distinto. Has de sentirte orgulloso de tu trabajo y de aprender a hacerlo bien y no estar siempre diciendo: «Sucede esto y lo de más allá…», «si yo tuviera otra ocupación quizá me saldrían mejor las cosas». No me importa lo que sea un hombre: no doy un céntimo por él —aquí la boca de Caleb adquirió una expresión muy firme, mientras chasqueaba los dedos— si no hace bien lo que se ha propuesto hacer, tanto si se trata del primer ministro como del que prepara los almiares.

—Estoy seguro de que nunca podré vivir así siendo clérigo —dijo Fred, deseoso de dar un paso adelante en el razonamiento.

—Entonces déjalo, muchacho —dijo Caleb, bruscamente—, de lo contrario nunca estarás tranquilo. O, si estás tranquilo, serás un pobre hombre.

—Eso es más o menos lo que piensa Mary —dijo Fred, ruborizándose—. Creo que usted sabe lo que siento por Mary, señor Garth: espero que no le parezca mal que siempre la haya querido más que a ninguna otra persona y que nunca pueda querer a nadie como la quiero a ella.

La expresión de Caleb se fue ablandando visiblemente a medida que Fred iba hablando. Pero movió la cabeza con solemne lentitud y dijo:

—Eso hace aún más grande tu responsabilidad, Fred, si es que quieres hacerte responsable de la felicidad de Mary.

—Lo sé muy bien, señor Garth —respondió Fred, con gran vehemencia—, y haría cualquier cosa por ella. Dice que nunca se casará conmigo si me ordeno; y seré la persona más desgraciada del mundo si pierdo toda esperanza de conseguirla. De verdad, si pudiera dedicarme a alguna otra profesión o negocio… cualquier cosa para la que sirva, trabajaría con toda mi alma y me ganaría la aprobación de usted. Me gustaría algo que tuviera que ver con la vida al aire libre. Ya sé mucho sobre tierra y sobre ganado. Antes creía, aunque usted me considerará bastante estúpido por ello, que llegaría a tener tierras propias. Estoy seguro de que no me costaría trabajo aprender, especialmente si pudiera hacerlo de alguna manera bajo su dirección.

—Despacio, muchacho —dijo Caleb, con la imagen de Susan delante de los ojos—. ¿Qué le has dicho a tu padre de todo esto?

—Nada, todavía; pero tengo que decírselo. Solo estoy esperando a saber qué es lo que puedo hacer en lugar de ordenarme. Siento mucho disgustarlo, pero, cuando un hombre ya tiene veinticuatro años, hay que permitirle que juzgue por sí mismo. ¿Cómo podía saber cuando tenía quince lo que me convendría hacer ahora? Mi educación ha sido un error.

—Escúchame, Fred —dijo Caleb—. ¿Estás seguro de que Mary te quiere o de que se casará contigo?

—Le pedí al señor Farebrother que hablara con ella, porque a mí me lo tiene prohibido… No se me ocurrió otra manera de enterarme —dijo Fred disculpándose—. Y él dice que no tengo ninguna razón para desesperar, si consigo una posición digna… fuera de la Iglesia, quiero decir. Imagino que a usted le parecerá injustificable, señor Garth, que le moleste y que le manifieste mis sentimientos por Mary sin

mérito alguno por mi parte. Ya sé que no tengo el menor derecho… tan solo una deuda con usted que nunca podré saldar, incluso cuando haya sido capaz de pagarla con dinero.

—Sí, muchacho, sí que tienes derecho —dijo Caleb, con mucha emoción en la voz—. Los jóvenes siempre tienen derecho a que los viejos los ayuden a salir adelante. Yo también fui joven una vez y tuve que abrirme camino sin mucha ayuda; pero la habría recibido con los brazos abiertos, aunque solo hubiese sido por sentir que tenía a alguien a mi lado. Déjame pensarlo. Ven mañana a mi oficina a las nueve. A mi oficina, no te equivoques.

Aunque el señor Garth nunca daba un paso importante sin consultar a Susan, hay que confesar que en aquella ocasión ya había decidido lo que iba a hacer antes de llegar a casa. Con respecto a muchos asuntos en los que otros hombres se muestran muy exigentes u obstinados, Caleb era el hombre más manejable del mundo. Nunca sabía qué carne elegir y, si Susan le hubiese dicho que tenía que vivir en una casa de cuatro habitaciones para ahorrar, habría respondido: «De acuerdo», sin pedir más detalles. Pero cuando los sentimientos y el buen juicio de Caleb se pronunciaban con claridad, su decisión era inapelable; y a pesar de su benignidad y de su timidez a la hora de hacer reproches, todos los que estaban a su alrededor sabían que en las ocasiones excepcionales en que escogía algo, se mostraba inflexible. Y de hecho solo decidía mostrarse inflexible en interés de otra persona. En noventa y nueve puntos la señora Garth escogía, pero en el punto número cien se daba cuenta de que tendría que realizar la tarea singularmente difícil de renunciar a sus propios principios y convertirse en subordinada.

—Ha resultado ser como yo pensaba, Susan —dijo Caleb cuando se quedaron a solas por la noche. Ya había contado el incidente responsable de que Fred participara en sus tareas, pero se había callado el resultado final—. Los chicos se quieren… Fred y Mary.

La señora Garth posó su labor sobre la rodilla y fijó con ansiedad los penetrantes ojos en su marido.

—Cuando dejamos de trabajar Fred me lo contó todo. No soporta la idea de ser clérigo, y Mary dice que no se casará con él si se ordena; al chico le gustaría trabajar conmigo y dedicarse a los negocios. Y he decidido aceptarlo y hacer de él un hombre.

—¡Caleb! —dijo la señora Garth, con voz más grave de lo habitual, expresión de su resignado asombro.

—Es una buena cosa —dijo el señor Garth, apoyándose firmemente contra el respaldo del sillón y agarrando los brazos con ambas manos—. Tendré algunas dificultades con él, pero terminaré por sacarlo adelante. El chico quiere a Mary y un verdadero amor es una gran cosa para una mujer buena, Susan. Consigue moldear a muchos tipos poco hechos.

—¿Ha hablado Mary contigo del asunto? —dijo la señora Garth, un tanto herida por no haber recibido ninguna confidencia.

—Ni una palabra. Cierta vez le pregunté por Fred; también le hice una especie de advertencia. Me aseguró que nunca se casaría con un hombre perezoso y blando consigo mismo… No hemos hablado más desde entonces. Pero parece que Fred convenció al señor Farebrother para sondearla, porque Mary le había prohibido que le hablara él mismo, y el señor Farebrother ha logrado averiguar que nuestra hija quiere a Fred, pero dice que no debe hacerse clérigo. Fred solo piensa en Mary, lo veo con toda claridad: eso hace que yo tenga buena opinión del chico… y siempre nos ha gustado, Susan.

—Es una lástima para Mary, creo yo —dijo la señora Garth.

—¿Una lástima? ¿Por qué?

—Porque podría casarse con un hombre que vale veinte veces más que Fred Vincy.

—¿Y eso? —dijo Caleb, muy sorprendido.

—Estoy firmemente convencida de que el señor Farebrother siente afecto por ella y tenía intención de pedirla en matrimonio; pero desde el momento en que Fred lo ha utilizado como mensajero suyo, han desaparecido las posibilidades de que Mary se case con un partido más conveniente. —Había una rigurosa precisión en la manera de expresarse de la señora Garth, que se sentía irritada y desilusionada, pero que se inclinaba siempre a prescindir de palabras inútiles.

Caleb calló unos momentos, enfrentado con sentimientos en conflicto. Miró al suelo y movió la cabeza y las manos, como acompañando a algún razonamiento interior. Finalmente, dijo:

—Eso me hubiera hecho sentirme muy feliz y orgulloso, Susan, y me hubiese alegrado mucho por ti. Siempre me ha parecido que la vida que has tenido que llevar no estaba a la altura de tus merecimientos. Pero me aceptaste por marido, aunque era un hombre muy corriente.

—Acepté al hombre mejor y más inteligente que he conocido —dijo la señora Garth, convencida de que nunca hubiese amado a alguien que no reuniera aquellas características.

—Sí, pero quizá otros pensaron que podrías haberte casado mejor. Para mí, sin embargo, hubiese sido mucho peor. Y eso es lo que me llega al alma cuando pienso en Fred. El chico es bueno en el fondo y con la

inteligencia suficiente para salir adelante si se le pone en el buen camino; y quiere y respeta a mi hija más que a nada, y ella le ha hecho algo muy parecido a una promesa. Lo que digo es que el alma de ese muchacho está en mis manos, y haré todo lo que pueda por él con la ayuda de Dios. Es mi deber, Susan.

La señora Garth no era muy dada a las lágrimas pero, antes de que su marido terminase de hablar, había una muy grande cayéndole por la mejilla, resultado de una mezcla de sentimientos, entre los que figuraban una gran dosis de afecto y un poco de irritación. La madre de Mary se apresuró a limpiársela, diciendo:

—Muy pocos hombres considerarían un deber aumentar de esa manera sus preocupaciones, Caleb.

—Eso no quiere decir nada… Me da lo mismo lo que piensen otros hombres. Tengo un convencimiento muy firme dentro de mí y me guiaré por él; y espero que tu corazón me acompañe, Susan, para lograr que todo sea lo más fácil posible para Mary, pobrecita mía.

Caleb, recostado en el sillón, miró con expresión suplicante a su mujer. Ella se puso en pie y lo besó diciendo:

—¡Que Dios te bendiga, Caleb! Nuestros hijos tienen un buen padre.

Pero salió de la habitación y lloró a lágrima viva en compensación por las cosas que no había dicho. Estaba segura de que la conducta de su marido sería malentendida y, en cuanto a Fred, se notaba llena de fría sensatez y poco esperanzada. ¿Quién resultaría más capaz de prever el futuro… ella, con sus razonamientos desapasionados, o Caleb, con su ardiente generosidad?

Cuando Fred se presentó en la oficina del señor Garth a la mañana siguiente, tuvo que enfrentarse a una prueba para la que no estaba preparado.

—Vamos a ver, Fred —dijo Caleb—, tendrás que hacer algún trabajo de oficina. Me he ocupado siempre de la mayor parte, pero necesito que alguien me ayude, y como quiero que entiendas la contabilidad y aprendas el valor de las cosas, estoy decidido a prescindir de otro empleado. Así que tendrás que aplicarte con empeño. ¿Qué tal te va en caligrafía y en aritmética?

A Fred le dio un vuelco el corazón; no había pensado en trabajo de oficina, pero estaba decidido a todo y no iba a echarse atrás.

—La aritmética no me da miedo, señor Garth: siempre me ha resultado fácil. Y creo que usted ya conoce mi letra.

—Veamos —dijo Caleb, cogiendo una pluma, examinándola cuidadosamente y pasándosela a Fred, bien mojada en tinta, junto con una hoja de papel rayado—. Copia una línea o dos de esta evaluación, con las cifras del final.

Por aquel entonces existía la opinión de que era impropio de un caballero escribir de manera legible, o con una caligrafía que pudiera considerarse adecuada para un oficinista. Fred copió las líneas indicadas con una letra que no desmerecía de la de cualquier vizconde u obispo del momento: las vocales eran todas iguales y las consonantes solo se distinguían por dirigirse unas hacia arriba y otras hacia abajo; los trazos tenían una borrosa solidez y las letras en general desdeñaban mantenerse a la misma altura: en resumen, se trataba de un manuscrito de esa venerable especie que resulta fácil de interpretar cuando se sabe de antemano lo que su autor quiere decir.

Mientras lo miraba escribir, el rostro de Caleb manifestó un creciente desencanto, pero cuando Fred le pasó el papel salió de su boca algo parecido a un gruñido y en seguida cubrió apasionadamente la hoja con el revés de la mano. Un trabajo de tan mala calidad como aquel acababa con toda la mansedumbre de Caleb Garth.

—¡Demonios! —exclamó, con otro gruñido—. ¡Pensar que en este país la educación de un hombre puede costar cientos y cientos de libras y acaba dando estos resultados! —Luego, con tono más patético, alzándose las gafas y mirando al desafortunado amanuense—: Que el Señor tenga compasión de nosotros, Fred, pero ¡esto no hay manera de aceptarlo!

—¿Qué puedo hacer, señor Garth? —preguntó Fred, que se había deprimido mucho, no solo por las críticas a su caligrafía, sino ante la perspectiva de pasar a formar parte del gremio de los oficinistas.

—¿Qué puedes hacer? Pues aprender a dar forma a las letras y a conseguir que estén a la misma altura. ¿De qué sirve escribir si no hay nadie que entienda lo que escribes? —preguntó Caleb con gran energía, muy preocupado por la mala calidad del trabajo—. ¿Es que hay tan poco que hacer en el mundo como para enviar rompecabezas por todo el país? Pero así es como se educa a la gente. No sé el tiempo que perdería con las cartas que me escriben algunas personas si Susan no se encargara de interpretármelas. Es repugnante. —Aquí Caleb apartó el papel con un gesto brusco.

Cualquier extraño que hubiese contemplado en aquel instante el interior de la oficina se habría preguntado qué drama se estaba desarrollando entre el indignado hombre de negocios y el joven bien parecido cuya delicada tez se había cubierto de manchas rojas mientras se mordía los labios lleno de

humillación. Fred se debatía entre muchos pensamientos. El señor Garth se había mostrado tan amable y alentador al principio de su entrevista que la gratitud y la esperanza alcanzaron un nivel muy alto, por lo que la caída también estaba en proporción. Fred no había pensado en hacer trabajo de oficina: de hecho, como la mayoría de los jóvenes caballeros, quería una ocupación que careciese de componentes desagradables. No estoy en condiciones de decir cuáles podrían haber sido las consecuencias de aquel tropiezo si Fred no se hubiese prometido a sí mismo ir a Lowick a ver a Mary y a contarle que trabajaría a las órdenes de su padre. Estaba decidido a no fallar en aquel punto.

—Lo siento mucho —fue cuanto consiguió decir. Pero el señor Garth se había aplacado ya.

—Saldremos adelante de todas formas, Fred —empezó, volviendo a su habitual tono calmoso—. Todo el mundo aprende a escribir. Yo lo hice solo. Propóntelo de verdad y trabaja toda la noche si no te bastan las horas del día. Tendremos paciencia, muchacho. Callum seguirá llevando los libros una temporada, mientras estés aprendiendo. Ahora he de marcharme —continuó, poniéndose en pie—. Tienes que informar a tu padre de nuestro acuerdo. Me ahorraré el sueldo de Callum cuando seas capaz de escribir; y estoy en condiciones de pagarte ochenta libras durante el primer año y más en el futuro.

Cuando Fred dio las necesarias explicaciones a sus padres, el efecto que tuvieron sobre los dos fue una sorpresa que le quedó muy grabada en la memoria. Lo primero que hizo al salir del despacho del señor Garth fue trasladarse directamente al almacén, comprendiendo con acierto que la manera más respetuosa de comportarse con su padre era darle la penosa noticia de la forma más seria y ceremoniosa posible. Además, se entendería con toda claridad que se trataba de una decisión definitiva si la entrevista se celebraba en las horas más solemnes de la jornada de su padre, que eran las que transcurrían en su despacho del almacén.

Fred fue al grano directamente y explicó con brevedad lo que había hecho y lo que estaba decidido a hacer; manifestó al final su pesar por ser la causa de una desilusión para su padre y se responsabilizó de sus propias faltas. El pesar era auténtico e hizo que Fred se expresara con palabras simples y emotivas.

El señor Vincy lo escuchó muy sorprendido, sin dejar escapar siquiera una exclamación, silencio que dado su carácter impaciente era señal de una emoción poco común. No se sentía muy optimista sobre el estado de sus negocios aquella mañana, y el gesto amargo de su boca se fue haciendo más marcado mientras escuchaba. Cuando Fred hubo terminado, se produjo una pausa de casi un minuto, durante la cual el señor Vincy volvió a colocar un libro de contabilidad en un cajón del escritorio e hizo girar la llave con un gesto muy enérgico. Luego miró a su hijo fijamente y dijo:

—Así que te has decidido por fin, ¿no es eso?

—Sí, padre.

—Muy bien; pues persevera. No tengo nada más que decirte. Has tirado por la borda tu educación y has bajado un peldaño en la escala social, aunque yo te había dado todos los medios para que ascendieras, eso es todo.

—Siento mucho que no estemos de acuerdo, padre. Creo que puedo ser tan caballero en el trabajo que he elegido como ordenándome. Pero le estoy muy agradecido por tratar de hacer por mí todo lo posible.

—Muy bien; no tengo nada más que decir. Me lavo las manos en todo lo que a ti se refiere. Solo espero que cuando tengas un hijo te pague mejor tus desvelos por él.

Aquello dolió mucho a Fred. Su padre estaba utilizando la injusta ventaja de que todos disponemos cuando nos encontramos en una situación patética y vemos nuestro pasado como si fuera parte de ese patetismo. En realidad, los deseos del señor Vincy para su hijo no habían sido en buena parte más que orgullo, desconsideración y egoísmo insensato. Pero de todas formas el padre desilusionado tenía un gran ascendiente moral; y Fred sintió que se le proscribía con una maldición.

—Espero que no le importe que siga en casa —dijo, después de ponerse en pie para irse—, ganaré lo suficiente para pagar mi manutención y, como es lógico, me gustaría hacerlo.

—¡Al demonio con la manutención! —dijo el señor Vincy, recobrando su habitual expresividad por la indignación que le produjo la idea de que fuese necesaria la colaboración de Fred para mantener bien provista su mesa—. Tu madre querrá por supuesto que te quedes. Pero no pienso seguir proporcionándote un caballo, de eso puedes estar seguro; y también tendrás que pagarte el sastre. Me imagino que no te importará disponer de algunos trajes menos cuando tengas que pagártelos.

Fred no acababa de marcharse, aún tenía algo más que decir. Finalmente se decidió a hacerlo.

—Confío en que quiera usted estrecharme la mano, padre, y perdonarme por el disgusto que le he dado.

El señor Vincy desde su sillón lanzó una rápida ojeada a su hijo, que se hallaba ahora a su lado, y extendió la mano, diciendo precipitadamente:

—Sí, sí, no hablemos más de este asunto.

Fred tuvo que dar muchas explicaciones a su madre y contarle muchas más cosas, pero ella se mostró de todas formas inconsolable, por tener muy presente algo en lo que quizá su marido no había pensado: la certeza de que Fred se casaría con Mary Garth y de que su vida (la de la señora Vincy) perdería calidad a partir de aquel momento por la perpetua presencia de los Garth y de su manera de entender la vida, y de que su hijo muy querido, con un rostro tan agraciado y unos cabellos tan a la moda, «muy por encima del hijo de cualquier otra persona de Middlemarch», llegaría sin duda a igualarse con aquella familia en la vulgaridad de su apariencia y en su descuido en el vestir. Aunque a ella le parecía que existía una conspiración por parte de los Garth para apoderarse del deseable Fred, no se atrevió a extenderse sobre el particular, porque una leve insinuación había bastado para que su hijo «explotara» contra ella como nunca lo había hecho antes. El carácter de la señora Vincy era demasiado dulce para manifestar enfado; pero sintió que su felicidad había sufrido un golpe muy duro y durante varios días el simple hecho de mirar a su hijo le hacía llorar un poco, como si este fuese objeto de alguna funesta profecía. Quizá la señora Vincy tardó más en recobrar su habitual alegría porque Fred le prohibió volver a tratar aquella delicada cuestión con su padre, que había aceptado su decisión y le había perdonado. Si su marido hubiese manifestado una violenta oposición a aquel proyecto, la señora Vincy habría sentido la necesidad de defender a su preferido. Habían pasado ya cuatro días cuando el señor Vincy dijo:

—Vamos, Lucy, querida, no estés tan desanimada. Siempre lo has mimado y seguirás haciéndolo.

—Nunca me había sentido tan herida, Vincy —dijo su esposa, cuya hermosa garganta y barbilla empezaron otra vez a temblar—; tan solo durante su enfermedad.

—¡Vamos, vamos, no tiene la menor importancia! Hemos de estar preparados para que nuestros hijos nos den problemas. No lo pongas más difícil haciéndome pensar que estás muy abatida.

—No; eso no voy a hacerlo —dijo la señora Vincy, estimulada por aquel llamamiento y recomponiéndose con una leve sacudida, como un pájaro que pone orden en su plumaje alborotado.

—No servirá de nada que empecemos a preocuparnos por uno de ellos —dijo el señor Vincy, deseoso de combinar alguna queja con el buen humor doméstico—. También está Rosamond además de Fred.

—Sí, pobrecilla. He sentido mucho que se le malograra el niño; pero lo ha superado muy bien.

—¡El niño es lo de menos! No hay duda de que Lydgate está echando a perder la clientela que heredó de Peacock y endeudándose además, según he oído. Ya verás cómo Rosamond vendrá a verme cualquier día con una bonita historia. No me sacarán dinero, te lo aseguro. Que los ayude la familia de Lydgate. Nunca me gustó ese matrimonio. Aunque hablar no sirve de nada. Llama para que traigan limones y alegra esa cara tan triste. Mañana os llevaré a ti y a Louisa a Riverston.

Capítulo LVII

Apenas contaban ocho veranos cuando un nombre
se apoderó de sus almas y provocó en ellas la misma conmoción
que estremece los nuevos brotes y da forma a su escondida estructura
al penetrarles el aire que vivifica:
el nombre de aquel que habló del leal Evan Dhu,
del pintoresco Bradwardine, y de Vich Ian Vor,
ampliando el pequeño mundo que conoció su infancia
con una tierra de montañas, lagos y peñascos,
y agrandándolo aún más con el asombro, con el amor y con la fe
en Walter Scott, quien, viviendo muy lejos
les enviaba aquel tesoro de alegría y nobles pesares.
El libro y ellos tendrían que separarse, pero día a día,
en líneas tan torcidas como el correr de gruesas arañas,
escribieron la historia, sacada de Tully Veolan.[124]

La tarde que Fred Vincy fue andando a la rectoría de Lowick (empezaba a darse cuenta de que vivía en un mundo en el que incluso un joven animoso tenía a veces que trasladarse a pie por falta de caballo), se puso en marcha a las cinco y, de camino, hizo una visita a la señora Garth, deseoso de comprobar que aceptaba su nueva relación de buen grado.

Encontró a todo el grupo familiar, perros y gatos incluidos, bajo el gran manzano del huerto. Era un día de fiesta para la señora Garth, porque su hijo mayor, Christy, su gran alegría y su gran orgullo, había vuelto a casa para pasar unas breves vacaciones: Christy, que consideraba la cosa más deseable del mundo ser profesor, estudiar todas las literaturas y convertirse en un nuevo Porson[125]; Christy, que venía a ser una encarnación de las críticas al pobre Fred, una demostración práctica que le ofrecía aquella madre tan pedagógica. El mismo Christy, edición masculina de la señora Garth con rostro cuadrado y espaldas muy anchas, que apenas le llegaba a Fred a la altura del hombro (lo que aún hacía más difícil que se le pudiera considerar superior), se comportaba siempre con gran sencillez y se preocupaba tan poco del desinterés de este último por la erudición como del de una jirafa, lamentando solo no ser tan alto. Ahora estaba tumbado en el suelo junto a la silla de su madre, con el sombrero de paja tapándole los ojos, mientras Jim, al otro lado, leía en voz alta una obra del escritor que ha desempeñado un papel muy importante en la felicidad de muchas vidas jóvenes. El volumen que tenía en las manos era *Ivanhoe*, y Jim narraba la gran escena de tiro con arco durante el torneo, pero se veía interrumpido con mucha frecuencia por Ben, que había ido a buscar su viejo arco y sus flechas, y estaba poniéndose muy pesado, en opinión de Letty, al suplicar a todos los presentes que se fijaran en sus disparos sin precisión alguna, cosa que nadie deseaba hacer con excepción de Brownie, el activo, pero probablemente superficial, perro de raza desconocida, mientras el grisáceo terranova tumbado al sol los observaba con la apagada neutralidad de sus muchos años. La misma Letty, que mostraba en la boca y en el delantal algunos tenues signos de haber colaborado en la recolección de las cerezas que ahora formaban un montón de coral sobre la mesa del té, también se había sentado en la hierba, y escuchaba la lectura con ojos muy abiertos.

El centro de interés cambió con la llegada de Fred Vincy. Cuando, al sentarse en un taburete, dijo que estaba de paso hacia el rectorado de Lowick, Ben, que había abandonado el arco y llevaba en brazos un gatito a medio crecer y no muy bien dispuesto, se puso a horcajadas sobre la pierna que Fred tenía

extendida y dijo:

—¡Llévame!

—A mí también —dijo Letty.

—No puedes ir tan deprisa como Fred y como yo —dijo Ben.

—Sí que puedo. Madre, haz el favor de decirle que yo también voy —suplicó Letty, cuya vida sufría muchos altibajos por su resistencia a aceptar el puesto secundario que le correspondía, dada su condición de mujer.

—Yo me voy a quedar con Christy —anunció Jim; esto era lo mismo que explicar su ventajosa situación frente a aquellos bobalicones; con lo que Letty se llevó una mano a la cabeza y contempló a uno y otro con celos indecisos.

—Vayamos todos a ver a Mary —dijo Christy, abriendo los brazos.

—No, querido, no debemos caer como un enjambre sobre la rectoría. Y no vas bien con ese viejo traje tuyo. Además, vuestro padre volverá pronto a casa. Tenemos que dejar a Fred que vaya solo. Puede decirle a Mary que estás aquí para que venga mañana.

Christy contempló sus rodilleras y después los hermosos pantalones blancos de Fred. Sin duda el corte de la ropa del joven Vincy era una buena indicación de las ventajas de una universidad inglesa, y sus modales resultaban elegantes incluso cuando tenía calor y se echaba el cabello hacia atrás con el pañuelo.

—Niños, marchaos —dijo la señora Garth—; hace demasiado calor para que estemos todos tan juntos. Id con vuestro hermano y enseñadle los conejos.

El mayor entendió al instante, y se llevó a los niños en seguida. Fred comprendió que la señora Garth quería darle una oportunidad para que dijese lo que tuviera que decir, pero solo pudo empezar comentando:

—¡Qué contenta estará de tener aquí a Christy!

—Sí; ha venido antes de lo que yo esperaba. Se apeó de la diligencia a las nueve, cuando su padre acababa de marcharse. Estoy deseando que vuelva Caleb y se entere de los maravillosos progresos que está haciendo Christy. Ha pagado sus gastos del año pasado dando clases particulares. Espera conseguir pronto empleo como tutor y salir al extranjero.

—Es un gran muchacho —dijo Fred, para quien aquella alegre información tenía cierto sabor a medicina —, que no causa trastornos a nadie. —Después de una breve pausa, añadió—: Pero temo que usted piensa que yo voy a ser una fuente de problemas para su marido.

—A Caleb le gustan las dificultades: es uno de esos hombres que siempre hacen más de lo que se les pide —respondió la señora Garth. Estaba haciendo punto y podía mirar a Fred o no, según le apeteciera, lo que siempre es una ventaja cuando se tiende a cargar las palabras propias de significados saludables; y aunque la señora Garth quería guardar la debida reserva, deseaba decir algo que contribuyera al progreso moral de Fred.

—Sé que me considera indigno, señora Garth, y por muy buenas razones —dijo Fred, animándose un tanto al advertir algo que parecía una disposición a sermonearlo—. Sucede que me he portado muy mal con aquellos a quienes más interés tengo en agradar. Pero si dos personas como el señor Garth y el señor Farebrother no se han desanimado del todo conmigo no veo por qué tendría que hacerlo yo. —A Fred se le ocurrió que quizá no estuviese de más sugerir aquellos ejemplos masculinos a la señora Garth.

—Sin duda —dijo ella, con énfasis creciente—. Un joven por quien dos personas así se han desvelado tanto, sería verdaderamente culpable si lo echara todo a rodar e hiciera estéril su sacrificio.

Fred se sorprendió un poco ante aquellas palabras tan severas, pero se limitó a decir:

—Espero que no me suceda eso, señora Garth, porque tengo algunos motivos para creer que quizá Mary me acepte como marido. ¿Le ha hablado de ello el señor Garth? No se sorprendería usted demasiado, ¿no es cierto? —concluyó Fred, refiriéndose tan solo, con toda inocencia, a lo evidente de su cariño por Mary.

—¿Si me ha sorprendido que mi hija te haya dado ánimos? —replicó la señora Garth, convencida de que sería bueno para Fred advertir con mayor claridad que la familia de Mary no había previsto aquel resultado, fueran cuales fuesen las suposiciones de los Vincy—. Sí, confieso que me ha sorprendido.

—Nunca me los ha dado… ni por lo más remoto, cuando he hablado con ella personalmente —dijo Fred deseoso de defender a Mary—. Pero cuando pedí al señor Farebrother que lo hiciera por mí, Mary le dio esperanzas.

El afán admonitorio que se había despertado en la señora Garth no estaba aún plenamente satisfecho. Le irritaba bastante, a pesar incluso de su gran capacidad de autodominio, que aquel jovencito tan lozano prosperase gracias a los desengaños de personas más melancólicas y prudentes (que se comiera un ruiseñor pensando que era un pájaro cualquiera), y que, mientras tanto, su familia supusiera que la de Mary estaba

muy necesitada de aquel retoño; además, la irritación de la señora Garth había fermentado con mayor ímpetu por su voluntad de no manifestarla ante su marido. A veces esposas ejemplares encuentran así chivos expiatorios, y en aquella ocasión la madre de Mary dijo con gran energía:

—Cometiste una gran equivocación, Fred, al pedirle al señor Farebrother que hablara en tu nombre.

—¿Una gran equivocación? —dijo Fred, enrojeciendo al instante. Se sintió lleno de alarma, pero sin saber a qué se refería la señora Garth, y añadió, en tono de disculpa—: El señor Farebrother siempre ha sido muy amigo nuestro; y yo sabía que Mary le escucharía con seriedad; y él aceptó el encargo de buen grado.

—Sí; los jóvenes suelen ser ciegos a todo lo que no sean sus propios deseos, y muy pocas veces se imaginan lo mucho que esos deseos cuestan a otras personas —respondió la señora Garth. No tenía intención de profundizar más en aquella saludable doctrina general y desahogó su indignación en una innecesaria operación de desenredar su hilo de estambre, frunciendo el entrecejo con aspecto solemne.

—No se me ocurre cómo mi encargo pudo resultar penoso para el señor Farebrother —dijo Fred, que notó sin embargo cómo ideas sorprendentes empezaban a formársele en la cabeza.

—Precisamente; no se te ocurre —dijo la señora Garth, pronunciando las palabras con la mayor nitidez posible.

Por un momento Fred contempló el horizonte con desaliento y preocupación y luego, volviéndose rápidamente, exclamó casi con dureza:

—¿Quiere decir, señora Garth, que el señor Farebrother está enamorado de Mary?

—Y si así fuera, Fred, creo que eres la última persona que debería sorprenderse —replicó la señora Garth, dejando la labor a un lado y cruzándose de brazos. De hecho, sus sentimientos estaban divididos entre la satisfacción de darle a Fred su merecido y el temor a haber ido demasiado lejos. Fred cogió su sombrero y su bastón y se levantó muy deprisa.

—En ese caso, ¿cree usted que me estoy interponiendo en su camino y también en el de Mary? —dijo, con un tono que parecía exigir una respuesta.

La señora Garth no fue capaz de hablar en seguida. Había logrado colocarse en la desagradable posición de tener que decir lo que realmente pensaba, cuando por otra parte había sólidas razones para ocultarlo. Y en su caso la conciencia de haber hablado más de la cuenta resultaba muy humillante. Además, Fred había emitido una inesperada carga de electricidad, y en seguida añadió:

—El señor Garth parecía satisfecho con la idea de que Mary me tuviera afecto. No es posible que supiese nada de esto.

La señora Garth sintió un vivo remordimiento al oír el nombre de su marido, porque la posibilidad de que Caleb censurase alguna de sus acciones le resultaba difícilmente soportable.

—Lo que te he dicho es tan solo una deducción —respondió, queriendo evitar consecuencias no deseadas—. No me consta que Mary sepa nada de este asunto.

Tampoco se decidió a suplicarle que guardara silencio sobre un tema que ella misma había mencionado sin ninguna necesidad, ya que no estaba acostumbrada a rebajarse de aquella forma; y mientras dudaba se produjo una concatenación en cascada de causas y efectos bajo el manzano donde estaba el servicio de té. Ben, que daba saltos por la hierba con Brownie en los talones, al ver al gatito arrastrando la labor de punto por un cabo de lana cada vez más largo, se puso a gritar y a dar palmadas; Brownie ladró, el gatito, desesperado, saltó sobre la mesa del té y derramó la leche, después se bajó de nuevo llevándose consigo la mitad de las cerezas; y Ben, apoderándose del calcetín a medio tejer, se lo metió al gatito por la cabeza, proporcionándole una nueva fuente de terror, mientras Letty, que apareció en aquel momento, alzó la voz pidiéndole a su madre que pusiese fin a tanta crueldad…; se trataba de una historia tan sobrecogedora como los relatos de la vida en la cárcel. La señora Garth se vio obligada a intervenir, aparecieron los demás miembros de la familia y el *tête-à-tête* con Fred se dio por terminado. El joven Vincy se marchó en seguida y la señora Garth solo pudo esbozar una retractación de su severidad diciéndole: «Que Dios te bendiga», mientras le estrechaba la mano.

La madre de Mary se daba cuenta, con desazón, de que había estado a punto de hablar como la mujer necia que primero cuenta algo y después pide silencio. Esto último no había llegado a hacerlo, y para evitar las reconvenciones de Caleb, decidió acusarse y confesárselo todo aquella misma noche. Era curioso qué tribunal tan terrible era para ella el bondadoso Caleb, siempre que este se revestía de autoridad. Estaba dispuesta a hacerle ver que aquella revelación podía hacer mucho bien a Fred.

No cabe duda de que las palabras de la señora Garth tuvieron un poderoso efecto sobre el joven Vincy mientras caminaba en dirección a Lowick. Su naturaleza optimista y despreocupada no había recibido nunca un golpe tan violento como aquella insinuación de que, de no haber sido por él, Mary podría haber hecho una boda mucho más conveniente. También le molestaba haber sido un patán tan estúpido como

para pedirle aquel favor al señor Farebrother. Pero es normal en el comportamiento de un enamorado, o lo era al menos en el caso de Fred, que la nueva preocupación surgida acerca de los sentimientos de Mary se impusiera a todas las demás. A pesar de su confianza en la generosidad del señor Farebrother, Fred no podía por menos de imaginarse que tenía un rival: se trataba de una sensación completamente nueva, y que le molestaba mucho, ya que no estaba en absoluto dispuesto a renunciar a Mary por el bien de ella, y sí en cambio a luchar con cualquier hombre, fuera quien fuese. Aunque la lucha con el señor Farebrother tenía que ser en sentido metafórico, lo que para Fred era mucho más difícil que si se tratara de un problema de músculos. Sin duda, aquella experiencia fue para Fred un castigo casi tan duro como la decepción con el testamento de su tío. El acero no había llegado a entrarle en el alma, pero empezaba a imaginarse cuáles podrían ser los efectos de su filo. No se le ocurrió ni por un momento que la señora Garth pudiera estar equivocada sobre el señor Farebrother, pero tal vez sí acerca de Mary, que había pasado las últimas semanas en la rectoría; quizá su madre supiera muy poco de lo que sucedía dentro de su cabeza.

No se sintió muy a gusto cuando la encontró en el salón, con aspecto muy alegre, en compañía de las tres señoras. Hablaban animadamente de algún tema que abandonaron al entrar él; Mary, además, estaba copiando los rótulos de un montón de cajones muy poco profundos con una letra diminuta que era una de sus habilidades. El señor Farebrother se hallaba en el pueblo, y las tres señoras no sabían nada de la relación entre los dos jóvenes: era imposible que cualquiera de ellas propusiera que salieran solos a pasear por el jardín, y Fred hizo para sus adentros la predicción de que tendría que marcharse sin poder hablar en privado con Mary. Procedió a contarle la llegada de Christy, y después le habló de su empleo a las órdenes de su padre; y se sintió reconfortado al ver que aquella última noticia afectaba vivamente a Mary.

—Me alegro muchísimo —dijo muy deprisa, y se inclinó de nuevo sobre los rótulos para evitar que nadie pudiera verle la cara. La señora Farebrother, sin embargo, no podía dejar pasar aquellas palabras sin un comentario.

—No querrá usted decir, mi querida señorita Garth, que se alegra de que un joven renuncie a la Iglesia para la que ha sido educado; interpreto que, estando las cosas así, solo se alegra de que trabaje con una persona tan excelente como su padre.

—Si he de ser sincera, no, señora Farebrother: creo que me alegro de las dos cosas —dijo Mary, librándose con habilidad de una lágrima rebelde—. Tengo una mentalidad muy secular. Nunca me ha gustado ningún clérigo con la excepción del vicario de Wakefield[126] y del señor Farebrother.

—¿Y eso por qué, querida? —dijo la señora Farebrother, inmovilizando las grandes agujas de madera con que hacía punto y mirando a Mary—. Usted siempre tiene alguna buena razón para sus opiniones, pero esta me asombra. Por supuesto, no me refiero a quienes predican nuevas doctrinas. Pero ¿por qué le desagradan los clérigos?

—Dios bendito —dijo Mary, con una expresión divertida en el rostro mientras parecía meditar durante unos momentos—. No me gustan los cuellos que llevan.

—Entonces tampoco le gustan los de Camden —dijo la señorita Winifred, con cierta preocupación.

—Sí que me gustan —dijo Mary—. No me gustan los de otros clérigos porque son ellos quienes los llevan.

—¡Qué cosa tan misteriosa! —dijo la señorita Noble, considerando que se trataba probablemente de su propia incapacidad mental.

—Bromea usted, querida. Debe de tener razones mejores para menospreciar a un estamento tan respetable —dijo la señora Farebrother majestuosamente.

—Las ideas de la señorita Garth sobre cuál debe ser la ocupación de las personas son tan rigurosas que es muy difícil satisfacerla —explicó Fred.

—Bien, al menos me alegro de que haga una excepción en favor de mi hijo —dijo la anciana señora.

Mary se estaba preguntando a qué obedecía el tono despechado de Fred cuando, al llegar el señor Farebrother, hubo que informarle de la colocación de su joven amigo a las órdenes del señor Garth. Al final dijo con tranquila satisfacción: «Eso está muy bien»; después se inclinó para examinar los rótulos de Mary y elogió su letra. Fred se sintió horriblemente celoso; se alegraba, por supuesto, de que el señor Farebrother fuese una persona tan estimable, pero lo hubiera preferido feo y gordo como sucede a veces con los hombres de cuarenta años. No había duda de cómo iba a terminar aquello, puesto que Mary colocaba públicamente a Farebrother por encima de todo el mundo, y las tres señoras se esforzaban al máximo para que prosperase aquella relación. Estaba convencido de que no hallaría una oportunidad para hablar con Mary cuando el señor Farebrother dijo:

—Fred, ayúdame a llevar estos cajones a mi estudio… Todavía no has visto mi magnífico estudio nuevo. Venga también, señorita Garth. Quiero que vea la estupenda araña que he encontrado hoy.

Mary advirtió al instante la intención del vicario. Desde aquella tarde memorable nunca se había apartado de su antigua amabilidad pastoral con ella, y sus momentáneas dudas se habían apagado por completo. Mary estaba acostumbrada a pensar con bastante rigor en lo que era probable, y si una opinión halagaba su vanidad, lo consideraba una advertencia para rechazarla por ridícula, ya que desde muy pequeña había practicado aquella disciplina. Sucedió lo que había previsto: después de pedir a Fred que admirase los muebles del estudio y a ella que hiciera lo mismo con la araña, el señor Farebrother dijo:

—Esperadme aquí un minuto o dos. Voy a buscar un grabado; Fred es lo bastante alto para poder colgarlo donde quiero. No tardaré en volver. —Acto seguido salió de la habitación. Sin embargo, lo primero que Fred le dijo a Mary fue:

—No sirve de nada, haga lo que haga, Mary. No hay duda de que acabarás casándote con Farebrother. —Había algo de rabia en su tono.

—¿Qué quieres decir, Fred? —exclamó Mary muy indignada, ruborizándose intensamente y privada de su habitual rapidez en la réplica.

—Es imposible que no lo comprendas, tú que te das cuenta de todo.

—Solo veo que te portas francamente mal al hablar así del señor Farebrother, que te ha ayudado por todos los medios a su alcance. ¿Cómo es posible que tengas semejante idea?

Fred fue bastante sagaz, a pesar de su irritación. Si era cierto que Mary no estaba al tanto, no le convenía transmitirle las palabras de la señora Garth.

—Es una cuestión de sentido común —replicó—. Si ves continuamente a un hombre que me gana en todos los terrenos y a quien tú sitúas por encima de todo el mundo, no tengo la más mínima posibilidad.

—Eres un desagradecido, Fred —dijo Mary—. Quisiera no haberle dicho nunca al señor Farebrother que me interesaba por ti.

—No, no soy desagradecido; sería el hombre más feliz del mundo si no fuera por eso. Se lo he contado todo a tu padre, y se ha mostrado muy cariñoso; me ha tratado como si fuera su hijo. Podría ir a trabajar con verdadero entusiasmo, escribir mejor y todo lo demás, si no fuera por eso.

—¿Por eso? ¿De qué hablas? —dijo Mary, imaginándose que alguien había dicho o hecho algo concreto.

—Esta horrorosa certeza de que Farebrother me va a desbancar.

Mary se aplacó por los deseos que tuvo de reír.

—Fred —dijo, mirándolo a hurtadillas y tratando de captar su atención, porque se había vuelto de espaldas con evidente mal humor—, eres deliciosamente ridículo. Si no fueras un bobo tan encantador, ¡qué tentación, la de representar a una perversa coqueta y hacerte creer que alguien me ha hecho la corte!

—¿Es cierto que me prefieres, Mary? —dijo Fred, volviendo hacia ella unos ojos llenos de afecto e intentando cogerle una mano.

—En este momento no me gustas en absoluto —dijo Mary, retrocediendo y escondiendo las manos detrás de la espalda—. Solo he dicho que ningún mortal me ha hecho jamás la corte a excepción de ti. Y eso no demuestra que una persona muy sabia no vaya a hacerlo nunca —terminó ella alegremente.

—Quisiera que me dijeras que nunca pensarás en él —suplicó Fred.

—No vuelvas a hablarme de eso —dijo Mary, poniéndose seria otra vez—. No sé si es una manifestación de estupidez o de ingratitud que no te hayas dado cuenta de que el señor Farebrother nos ha dejado solos a propósito para que podamos hablar con toda libertad. Me decepciona que estés tan ciego y no adviertas la delicadeza de sus sentimientos.

No hubo tiempo para añadir nada antes de que el señor Farebrother volviera con el grabado; y Fred regresó al salón todavía con un celoso temor en el corazón pero también con los consoladores argumentos que se deducían de las palabras y del comportamiento de Mary. En conjunto fue ella quien sufrió más como resultado de aquella conversación: inevitablemente veía ya las cosas de otra manera, y captó la posibilidad de nuevas interpretaciones. Se hallaba en una situación en la que parecía menospreciar al señor Farebrother, y aquello, en relación con un hombre muy respetado, es siempre peligroso para la firmeza de una mujer agradecida. Tener un motivo para volver a casa al día siguiente fue un alivio, porque Mary deseaba con gran ahínco que siempre quedara claro su amor por Fred. Cuando un tierno afecto se ha ido almacenando en nosotros a lo largo de gran parte de nuestra existencia, la idea de que podamos aceptar otra cosa en su lugar parece quitar valor a nuestra vida. Y podemos poner centinelas que vigilen nuestros afectos y nuestra constancia como podemos hacerlo con otros tesoros.

«Fred ha perdido las demás esperanzas que tenía; esta no puede fallarle», se dijo con una sonrisa en los labios. Era imposible no tener visiones pasajeras de otro género: nuevas dignidades y el reconocimiento de su valía, reconocimiento cuya ausencia había notado con frecuencia. Pero aquellas cosas, si Fred se quedaba fuera, Fred olvidado y triste por su ausencia, nunca tendrían la suficiente fuerza para que pensara en ellas

por propia iniciativa.

Capítulo LVIII

Como tus ojos ignoran el odio,
no puedo por ellos enterarme de tu cambio:
en las facciones de muchos la historia de un falso corazón
se escribe con mal humor, ceños y extrañas arrugas;
pero ordenó el Cielo al crearte
que habitara siempre en tu rostro el amor más sereno;
y fueran las que fuesen tus ideas o los movimientos de tu corazón,
tu apariencia reflejase únicamente dulzura.

SHAKESPEARE, *Sonetos*

En el momento en que el señor Vincy manifestaba sus temores por Rosamond, esta no se había planteado aún la posibilidad de hacer el tipo de petición que su padre preveía. No había tenido preocupaciones económicas, aunque su vida doméstica hubiese sido costosa y hubiera estado llena de acontecimientos. Su hijo nació antes de tiempo, y los faldones y los gorros bordados tuvieron que seguir guardados en algún cajón oscuro. Aquella desgracia se atribuía por entero a que Rosamond había insistido en montar a caballo cierto día en que su marido le había pedido que no lo hiciera; si bien no hay que deducir de ello que la señora Lydgate hubiese llegado a enfadarse o a decir de manera descortés a Tertius que haría lo que le apeteciera.

Lo que la empujó sobre todo a la práctica de la equitación fue la visita del capitán Lydgate, tercer hijo del baronet, quien, siento decirlo, era cordialmente detestado por nuestro Tertius del mismo apellido por su condición de insípido petimetre «que se hacía una raya en el pelo desde la frente al cogote siguiendo una moda despreciable» (no aceptada por el joven médico), y que estaba seguro (con la seguridad que proporciona la ignorancia) de tener siempre a punto la frase oportuna en cualquier tema de conversación. Lydgate maldecía interiormente su propia estupidez ya que había provocado aquella visita al alojarse en casa de su tío durante el viaje de novios, y había conseguido, además, ofender a Rosamond diciéndoselo así en privado. Porque para su esposa la visita del capitán Lydgate era un motivo de júbilo sin precedentes, aunque lo ocultara con mucha elegancia. Era hasta tal punto consciente de tener por invitado al hijo de un baronet, que, en su imaginación, las implicaciones de tan distinguido acontecimiento llegaban de manera espontánea al pensamiento de todos sus conciudadanos de Middlemarch; y cuando presentaba al capitán Lydgate, lo hacía con el sereno convencimiento de que su rango afectaba a los otros invitados como si se tratara de un olor. Aquella satisfacción bastó por el momento para disipar algunas decepciones ligadas a su condición de esposa de un médico, aunque fuese de muy buena familia; la visita del capitán situó a Rosamond, tanto visible como idealmente, por encima del nivel de Middlemarch, e hizo que el futuro adquiriese el brillo que le prestaban las cartas y las visitas a Quallingham y desde Quallingham, así como imprecisas mejoras en la situación profesional de Tertius como consecuencia de todo ello. Especialmente por cuanto, probablemente a instancias del capitán, su hermana casada, la señora Mengan, se había presentado con su criada, y se había quedado dos noches antes de proseguir viaje a Londres. De ahí que Rosamond se sintiera recompensada por su aplicación musical y por la cuidadosa selección de sus encajes.

En cuanto al capitán Lydgate, su frente estrecha, su nariz aquilina desviada hacia un lado y su forma más bien aburrida de hablar, podrían haber resultado desventajas si su poseedor estuviera privado del porte militar y del bigote que le dotaban de «estilo», algo muy apreciado por algunas cabezas rubias con aspecto

de flores. El primo de Tertius poseía también esa peculiar educación aristocrática que consiste en sentirse libre de las insignificantes preocupaciones ligadas al sentido del decoro de la clase media, siendo además un gran experto en encantos femeninos. Rosamond se complacía en su admiración más incluso que durante la visita a Quallingham, y al capitán no le costaba gran trabajo pasar todos los días varias horas flirteando con ella. La visita fue en conjunto una de las travesuras más agradables de la vida del capitán, quizá sobre todo porque sospechaba que su extraño primo Tertius quería que se fuera, aunque este, que hubiese preferido morir (hiperbólicamente hablando) antes que faltar a los deberes de la hospitalidad, reprimiera su desagrado y se limitara en líneas generales a fingir que no oía los comentarios del gallardo oficial, cediendo a Rosamond la tarea de contestarle. Porque Tertius no era en absoluto un marido celoso y prefería dejar a su mujer a solas con un joven frívolo que soportar su compañía.

—Me gustaría que hablaras más con el capitán durante la cena, Tertius —dijo Rosamond durante una velada en la que tan importante invitado había ido a Loamford para ver a algunos compañeros de la milicia allí acuartelados—. A veces tienes un aire tan ausente… Se diría que estás viendo a través de su cabeza algo que hay detrás, en lugar de mirarlo a él.

—Mi querida Rosy, confío en que no esperes que hable mucho con un asno tan engreído como ese —dijo Lydgate con tono brusco—. Si llega a romperse la cabeza, quizá la mire con interés, pero no antes.

—No comprendo por qué tienes que hablar de tu primo con tanto desprecio —dijo Rosamond, sin dejar de trabajar en su labor de costura, mientras se expresaba con una apacible seriedad que tenía un toque de desdén.

—Pregúntale a Ladislaw si no cree que tu capitán es el mayor pelmazo que ha conocido en toda su vida. Casi no viene ya por casa desde que apareció mi primo.

Rosamond pensó que sabía perfectamente por qué al señor Ladislaw no le gustaba el capitán: estaba celoso y a ella le agradaba que así fuera.

—Es imposible adivinar qué es lo que satisface a las personas excéntricas —respondió—, pero en mi opinión el capitán Lydgate es todo un caballero, y creo que no deberías, por respeto a sir Godwin, tratarlo groseramente.

—Hemos dado cenas en su honor. Y viene y va de acuerdo con sus gustos. No me necesita.

—De todas formas, cuando estás con él podrías mostrarte un poco más atento. Tal vez no sea un fénix de la inteligencia desde tu punto de vista; tiene una profesión distinta; pero no te vendría nada mal hablar un poco de los temas que le interesan. A mí me parece que su conversación es muy amena. Y desde luego es cualquier cosa menos un hombre sin principios.

—Lo cierto es que te gustaría que yo fuera un poco más como él, Rosy —dijo Lydgate, en una especie de resignado murmullo, con una sonrisa que no era exactamente tierna y que nada tenía de alegre. Rosamond guardó silencio y no volvió a sonreír; pero las encantadoras curvas de su rostro parecían suficientemente dulces sin necesidad de hacerlo.

Aquellas palabras de Lydgate eran como un triste hito que marcaba lo lejos que se hallaba de su antiguo país de ensueño, donde Rosamond Vincy daba la impresión de ser la perfecta encarnación de la feminidad, dispuesta a reverenciar la inteligencia de su marido a la manera de una consumada sirena que usara el peine y el espejo y cantase su canción con el único fin de facilitarle el descanso. Lydgate había empezado a distinguir entre aquella adoración imaginaria y la atracción que tiene el talento para una mujer porque da prestigio a un hombre, y viene a ser algo así como una condecoración en la solapa o un ilustrísimo delante del nombre.

También podría suponerse que Rosamond había avanzado un largo trecho desde la época en que encontraba tediosa la insípida conversación del señor Ned Plymdale; pero para la mayoría de los mortales hay una estupidez insoportable y otra que es perfectamente aceptable… De lo contrario, ¿qué sería de los lazos sociales? La estupidez del capitán Lydgate estaba delicadamente perfumada, se comportaba con «estilo», hablaba con buen acento, y estaba íntimamente relacionada con sir Godwin. Rosamond la encontraba muy agradable y se apropió de muchas de sus frases.

Por tanto, puesto que Rosamond, como ya sabemos, era aficionada a montar a caballo, hubo numerosas razones para que sintiera la tentación de reanudar sus paseos cuando el capitán Lydgate, que había ordenado a su criado que lo siguiera con dos caballos y se alojara en El Dragón Verde, le suplicó que utilizara la jaca torda, asegurándole que era muy mansa y estaba adiestrada para servir de montura a una dama: de hecho la había comprado para su hermana y se disponía a llevarla a Quallingham. Rosamond salió la primera vez sin decírselo a su marido, y regresó antes de que volviera; pero el paseo había resultado un éxito tan completo, y ella se encontró después tan bien, que decidió informar a Tertius con la plena seguridad de que daría su consentimiento para que repitiera tan agradable experiencia.

Lydgate, por el contrario, más que ofenderse se sintió incapaz de entender cómo Rosy se había arriesgado a montar un caballo desconocido sin consultarle. Después de las primeras y casi ensordecedoras exclamaciones de asombro, que prepararon suficientemente a Rosamond para lo que se avecinaba, el joven médico guardó silencio unos momentos.

—En cualquier caso, has vuelto a casa sana y salva —dijo, por fin, con tono concluyente—. No volverás a montar, Rosy; eso no hay ni que decirlo. Aunque fuese la jaca más tranquila del mundo y la conocieras perfectamente, siempre seguiría existiendo la posibilidad de un accidente. Y sabes muy bien que te manifesté mi deseo de que no montaras el caballo ruano por esa misma razón.

—También existe la posibilidad de un accidente dentro de casa, Tertius.

—Querida, no digas disparates —respondió Lydgate con tono suplicante—; reconocerás que soy la persona idónea para opinar en este caso. Creo que basta con que diga que no tienes que volver a montar a caballo.

Rosamond estaba peinándose porque era casi la hora de la cena y el reflejo de su cabeza en el espejo no mostraba el menor cambio en su serena belleza, con la excepción de una ligera inclinación de su esbelto cuello. Lydgate había estado andando de un lado para otro con las manos en los bolsillos y terminó deteniéndose cerca de ella, como si esperase una promesa.

—Me gustaría que me sujetaras las trenzas, querido —dijo Rosamond, dejando caer los brazos con un suspiro apenas audible, como para hacer que su marido se avergonzara de estar allí inmóvil en una actitud tan desconsiderada. Lydgate le había sujetado las trenzas en muchas ocasiones, ya que era muy hábil con aquellos dedos suyos tan largos y bien formados. El joven médico alzó las suaves guirnaldas entretejidas con cabellos y las sujetó con la peineta (¡a tales tareas se ven abocados los hombres!); y ¿qué otra cosa podía hacer después, excepto besar la exquisita nuca que quedaba ahora al descubierto con todas sus delicadas curvas? Pero, aunque repitamos lo que ya hicimos antes, a menudo existen diferencias. Lydgate seguía enfadado y no había olvidado sus reivindicaciones.

—Le diré al capitán que tendría que haberlo pensado dos veces antes de ofrecerte su caballo —dijo, mientras se apartaba de su mujer.

—Te suplico que no hagas nada parecido, Tertius —respondió Rosamond, mirándolo y pronunciando las palabras con un tono algo menos dulce que de ordinario—. Sería tratarme como si fuera una niña. Prométeme que vas a dejar que sea yo quien se ocupe de este asunto.

Parecía haber algo de verdad en su objeción.

—Muy bien —dijo Lydgate con desabrida aquiescencia; y así terminó la discusión, haciendo él una promesa en lugar de hacérsela Rosamond a él.

La realidad es que la señora Lydgate estaba decidida a no prometer nada. Poseía esa victoriosa obstinación que nunca malgasta sus energías en una resistencia impetuosa. Lo que le apetecía hacer era lo que estaba bien, y toda su inteligencia se dirigía a obtener los medios para llevarlo a cabo. Rosamond se proponía montar de nuevo la jaca torda y así lo hizo en la primera oportunidad que le proporcionó la ausencia de su marido, con la intención de que no lo supiera hasta que hubiese dejado de tener importancia. La tentación era sin duda muy grande: a ella le gustaba mucho el ejercicio, y la satisfacción de cabalgar en una jaca de primera calidad, con el capitán Lydgate, el hijo de sir Godwin, en otro caballo igual a su lado, de que la viese así todo el mundo a excepción de su marido, estaba a la altura de sus sueños anteriores al matrimonio. Más aún, así afianzaba las relaciones con la familia de Quallingham, lo que a todas luces era un empeño muy prudente.

Pero la tranquila jaca torda, poco preparada para la caída de un árbol que estaban cortando en las estribaciones del bosque de Halsell, se asustó y dio un susto todavía peor a Rosamond, lo que causó al fin la pérdida del niño. Lydgate no pudo manifestar a su esposa la indignación que sentía, pero se mostró bastante áspero con el capitán, cuya visita, como es lógico, terminó muy poco después.

En todas las conversaciones que siguieron sobre el asunto, Rosamond se mostraba apaciblemente segura de que el paseo a caballo no era responsable de nada, y que si se hubiera quedado en casa habrían aparecido los mismos síntomas y todo habría terminado de la misma manera, porque ya antes había sentido algo parecido.

Lydgate solo podía decir: «¡Pobrecita!», pero en su interior se maravillaba de la terrible tenacidad de aquella criatura tan dulce. Poco a poco se le iba acumulando la asombrada convicción de su impotencia ante Rosamond. Sus conocimientos superiores y su fuerza mental, en lugar de ser, como había imaginado, un oráculo que consultar en todas las ocasiones, se dejaban de lado con toda naturalidad ante cualquier problema práctico. Lydgate había creído que la inteligencia de Rosamond tenía precisamente la receptividad adecuada para una mujer y ahora empezaba a descubrir en qué consistía aquella inteligencia, a

advertir la forma en que había cristalizado, convirtiéndose en una tupida red, distante e independiente. Nadie más veloz que Rosamond para ver las causas y los efectos que quedaban incluidos en la trayectoria de sus gustos e intereses personales: vio con claridad la preeminencia de Lydgate en la sociedad de Middlemarch y siguió trazando con la imaginación efectos sociales todavía más agradables cuando su talento lo hubiese promocionado; pero para ella su ambición profesional y científica no tenían más relación con aquellos efectos deseables que si hubieran sido la feliz consecuencia del descubrimiento de un aceite maloliente. Y dejando aparte aquel aceite, con el que ella nada tenía que ver, Rosamond confiaba por supuesto más en su propia opinión que en la de su marido. Lydgate se asombró al descubrir en innumerables cuestiones sin importancia, al igual que en el último caso más grave de los paseos a caballo, que el afecto no servía para hacerla sumisa. No albergaba la menor duda de que el afecto existía, ni se le pasaba por las mientes que él hubiese hecho algo para enfriarlo. Estaba convencido de amar a su mujer con la misma ternura de siempre y de que podía acostumbrarse a sus tranquilas rebeldías; pero… de todas formas, Lydgate estaba muy preocupado y era consciente de la aparición en su vida de nuevos elementos tan perjudiciales para él como la repentina presencia del cieno para alguien acostumbrado a respirar y bañarse y lanzarse tras su resplandeciente presa en la más cristalina de las aguas.

Rosamond volvió muy pronto a tener el mismo aspecto encantador de siempre junto a su mesa de trabajo, a disfrutar con los paseos en el faetón de su padre y a considerar muy posible que la invitaran a Quallingham. Sabía que era un ornamento mucho más exquisito para el salón que ninguna de las hijas de la familia y, al reflexionar sobre el hecho de que los caballeros eran conscientes de ello, quizá no valoraba como es debido la escasa inclinación de las damas a dejarse eclipsar.

Lydgate, libre ya de ansiedades por causa suya, volvió a caer en lo que Rosamond denominaba, para sus adentros, melancolía: nombre con el que abarcaba todo lo relativo a sus meditabundas cavilaciones sobre otros temas distintos de ella, así como el gesto preocupado de la frente y el desinterés por todas las cosas ordinarias como si estuvieran mezcladas con hierbas amargas, y que en realidad constituían una especie de barómetro de su irritación y de sus desagradables presentimientos. Estos últimos estados de ánimo tenían entre otras una causa que, de manera generosa pero equivocada, Lydgate había rehuido mencionar ante Rosamond, temiendo que pudieran afectar de manera negativa su salud o su estado de ánimo. Entre ellos existía ese total desconocimiento de la trayectoria mental del otro que es sin duda posible incluso entre personas que piensan de continuo la una en la otra. A Lydgate le parecía que había consumido un mes tras otro sacrificando más de la mitad de sus mejores propósitos y energías a su ternura por Rosamond; soportando sus pequeñas exigencias e interrupciones sin impacientarse y, sobre todo, viendo, sin manifestar amargura, y cada vez con mayor claridad al disiparse progresivamente las ilusiones, la superficie vacía y ciega que el espíritu de Rosamond presentaba frente a su entusiasmo por los fines más desinteresados de su profesión y de sus trabajos científicos, entusiasmo que, imaginaba él, la esposa ideal debería adorar como algo sublime, aun sin saber en absoluto por qué tenía que ser así. Su paciencia, sin embargo, se mezclaba con un descontento íntimo que, si fuésemos sinceros, confesaríamos que constituye más de la mitad de nuestra amargura por los agravios que sufrimos, esposa o marido incluidos. Y es que nunca deja de ser cierto que, si hubiésemos sido más nobles, las circunstancias habrían tenido menos fuerza contra nosotros. Lydgate se daba cuenta de que sus concesiones a Rosamond no eran a menudo más que síntomas de las vacilaciones de la voluntad, de la lenta parálisis de un entusiasmo en constante desajuste con otra parte de nuestra vida. Y el entusiasmo de Lydgate estaba sometido a la presión continua no solo de un sencillo sufrimiento, sino a la presencia cáustica de una mezquina preocupación degradante, de las que arrojan la plaga de la ironía sobre los esfuerzos más nobles.

Se trataba de la preocupación que hasta entonces Lydgate se había abstenido de mencionar ante Rosamond; y estaba convencido, aunque con algo de asombro, de que a ella nunca se le había pasado por la imaginación, a pesar de que ninguna dificultad podía ser menos misteriosa. Que Lydgate tenía deudas era una conclusión con premisas evidentes, a la que observadores por completo ajenos al matrimonio habían llegado con facilidad; y el joven médico no lograba olvidarse mucho tiempo de que día tras día se iba hundiendo un poco más en ese pantano que atrae a los hombres con su hermosa alfombra de flores y verdor. Es increíble lo pronto que un hombre se hunde allí hasta el cuello… y se encuentra en una situación en la que, a pesar de sí mismo, se ve obligado a pensar sobre todo en escapar, aunque tenga en el alma la visión de todo un universo.

Dieciocho meses antes Lydgate era pobre, pero no había conocido nunca la necesidad apremiante de pequeñas sumas de dinero, y sentía más bien un ardiente desprecio por cualquiera que bajase un escalón para conseguirlas. Ahora, en cambio, experimentaba algo peor que un simple déficit: se veía asaltado por las odiosas y vulgares tribulaciones de un hombre que ha comprado y ha usado muchas cosas de las que

quizá podría haber prescindido y que no tiene dinero para pagarlas, aunque las peticiones para que salde sus deudas se han hecho apremiantes.

Cómo había llegado a tal situación es algo que se entiende con facilidad sin saber mucha aritmética ni tener muchos conocimientos sobre precios. Si un hombre al instalar una casa y prepararse para el matrimonio descubre que los muebles y otros gastos iniciales ascienden más o menos a cuatrocientas o quinientas libras por encima del capital de que dispone; si al final de un año resulta que los gastos ordinarios de la casa, caballos y todo lo demás, ascienden a casi mil libras, mientras que los ingresos, por una clientela que de acuerdo con los anteriores libros de contabilidad debía producir ochocientas al año, quedan reducidos, como cualquier estanque durante el verano, a menos de quinientas, en su mayor parte recibos sin cobrar, la conclusión evidente es que, tanto si le preocupa como si no, ese hombre tiene deudas. Aquellos eran tiempos menos caros que los nuestros y la vida de provincias, comparativamente modesta; pero la facilidad con que un médico que ha tenido que pagar recientemente una suma importante a otro colega para recoger su clientela, que se considera obligado a mantener dos caballos, que abastece su mesa sin tacañería y que paga un seguro de vida y un elevado alquiler por la casa y el jardín, puede encontrarse con unos gastos que dupliquen sus ingresos, es algo que advierte cualquiera que no considere estos detalles indignos de su atención. Rosamond, acostumbrada desde la infancia a vivir en un ambiente de derroche, pensaba que la mejor manera de llevar una casa consistía simplemente en encargar lo mejor de todo: ninguna otra cosa «estaba a la altura»; Lydgate, por su parte, suponía que «si se hacía algo, había que hacerlo bien»… y no veía cómo hubiesen podido vivir de otra manera. Si, con anterioridad, se le hubiera llamado la atención sobre cada capítulo de los gastos de la casa, habría comentado, probablemente, que «no podían subir mucho» y, si alguien hubiera sugerido ahorrar en algún artículo concreto —comprar, por ejemplo, pescado barato en lugar de caro—, le habría parecido sencillamente una idea tacaña, mezquina. A Rosamond, incluso sin una excusa como la visita del capitán Lydgate, le gustaba celebrar fiestas, y Lydgate, aunque a veces encontraba molestos a sus invitados, no ponía objeciones. Aquella sociabilidad parecía una parte necesaria de la prudencia profesional, y el agasajo ofrecido tenía que estar a la altura de las circunstancias. Es cierto que Lydgate visitaba constantemente las casas de los pobres y ajustaba sus prescripciones en materia de alimentos a los escasos medios de que disponían; pero, ¡cielo santo!, ¿es que aún puede extrañarle a alguien… es que no esperamos más bien que los hombres posean numerosos hilos de experiencia, unos al lado de otros, sin que nunca se molesten en compararlos? Los gastos —como la fealdad y los errores— se convierten en una cosa completamente distinta cuando unimos a ellos nuestra propia personalidad y los medimos echando mano de esa amplia diferencia, tan manifiesta (según nuestras propias impresiones), entre nosotros y los demás. Lydgate se creía descuidado en el vestir y despreciaba a un hombre que calculase el efecto de su indumentaria; le parecía simplemente natural mudarse todos los días: las camisas y la ropa interior se encargaban, como es lógico, por docenas. Debe recordarse que hasta entonces no había sentido nunca el freno desagradable de una deuda inoportuna y que dirigía sus pasos de acuerdo con la costumbre y no con la autocrítica. La sorpresa, sin embargo, se había producido.

La novedad de la situación la hizo aún más irritante. A Lydgate le asombró y le repugnó que circunstancias tan ajenas a todos sus propósitos, tan odiosamente desprovistas de conexión con los objetivos que le interesaban, le hubiesen tendido una emboscada, pillándolo desprevenido. Y no se trataba tan solo de las deudas ya existentes; tenía también la certeza de que en su presente situación las cosas no harían más que empeorar. Dos comerciantes de Brassing, cuyas facturas se remontaban a fechas anteriores a la boda y a quienes, por gastos corrientes imprevistos, Lydgate no había podido pagar aún, le habían enviado repetidas veces cartas muy desagradables a las que no había tenido más remedio que prestar atención. Es difícil imaginar a otra persona a quien esta situación pudiera exasperar más que a Lydgate, dado su orgullo y su repugnancia a pedir un favor o a tener que estar agradecido a alguien. Había desdeñado incluso hacer conjeturas sobre las intenciones del señor Vincy en cuestiones de dinero y nada, excepto la extrema necesidad, podría haberlo empujado a recurrir a su suegro, incluso aunque no hubiese sabido, por informaciones indirectas después de la boda, que los negocios de su suegro distaban mucho de ir viento en popa y que cualquier solicitud de ayuda sería mal recibida. Hay quien confía espontáneamente en la buena disposición de sus deudos; a Lydgate no se le había ocurrido nunca que tuviera necesidad de servirse de ella: no había pensado en lo que pedir dinero prestado podría significar para él; ahora que la idea le había entrado en la cabeza, comprendió que preferiría enfrentarse con cualquier otra dificultad. Mientras tanto carecía de dinero o de posibilidades de llegar a tenerlo; y su clientela no llevaba camino de producirle mayores ingresos.

No es nada sorprendente, por tanto, que Lydgate hubiese sido incapaz de ocultar todos los signos de su preocupación durante los últimos meses y que ahora, al recuperar Rosamond todo el vigor de la buena

salud, considerase la posibilidad de hacerla partícipe de sus dificultades. Su reciente familiaridad con las facturas de los comerciantes le había obligado a razonar utilizando un nuevo canal de comparación: Lydgate empezaba a considerar desde un nuevo punto de vista lo que era necesario e innecesario en las compras que se realizaban y a advertir la inevitabilidad de un cambio de costumbres. ¿Cómo podía llevarse a cabo aquel cambio sin la colaboración de Rosamond? La oportunidad para revelarle a su mujer tan desagradable situación le vino dada por las circunstancias.

Al no tener dinero y pedir privadamente consejo sobre qué garantía podía dar un hombre en su posición, Lydgate decidió ofrecer el único valor sólido del que aún disponía al acreedor menos imperioso, un platero y joyero que consentía en hacerse también cargo de la deuda con el tapicero, aceptando intereses por un determinado período. La garantía necesaria eran los muebles de la casa, con lo que se podía calmar a un acreedor durante un razonable período por tratarse de una deuda que no llegaba a las cuatrocientas libras; y el platero, el señor Dover, estaba dispuesto a reducirla aceptando la devolución de una parte de los cubiertos y de cualquier otro objeto que estuviera prácticamente nuevo. «Cualquier otro objeto» era una expresión que hacía referencia, delicadamente, a las joyas, y de forma más particular a las amatistas que, por valor de treinta libras, Lydgate había comprado como regalo de boda.

Puede haber discrepancia de opiniones sobre la prudencia del joven médico al hacer aquel presente: algunos quizá piensen que fue una atención elegante, lógica en un hombre como él, y que la culpa de cualquier consecuencia molesta radicaba en la mezquina estrechez de la vida provinciana en aquellos tiempos, que no ofrecía comodidades para los profesionales cuya fortuna no estaba en proporción con sus gustos; y también en la ridícula resistencia de Lydgate a pedir dinero a sus familiares.

Sin embargo, en aquella hermosa mañana en que fue a hacer un último encargo de cubertería, la compra de las amatistas le había parecido un gasto sin importancia: al lado de otras joyas mucho más caras, y añadida a otros encargos cuyo importe aún no había sido calculado con exactitud, treinta libras por unos adornos que parecían pensados expresamente para el cuello y los brazos de Rosamond difícilmente podían considerarse una cifra excesiva, teniendo además en cuenta que no existía dinero alguno en efectivo que marcara el límite de los gastos posibles. Al presentarse la nueva crisis, la imaginación de Lydgate no pudo por menos de examinar la posibilidad de que las amatistas recuperaran su sitio entre las existencias del señor Dover, aunque le acobardara la idea de proponérselo a Rosamond. Al verse obligado a discernir consecuencias que anteriormente nunca había tenido costumbre de examinar, se preparaba para actuar con aquellos nuevos datos con parte del rigor (en ningún caso con todo) que hubiera aplicado a la realización de un experimento. Iba dándose ánimos para utilizar aquel rigor mientras regresaba de Brassing, al tiempo que meditaba sobre la exposición de los hechos que tenía que hacerle a Rosamond.

Llegó a casa a última hora de la tarde. Aquel hombre enérgico de veintinueve años y muchos talentos se sentía muy desgraciado. No se decía, encolerizado consigo mismo, que había cometido una terrible equivocación; pero aquel error trabajaba en su interior como una enfermedad crónica diagnosticada, mezclando sus desagradables síntomas con cualquier perspectiva y debilitando cualquier idea. Mientras avanzaba por el pasillo en dirección al salón oyó el piano y voces cantando. Ladislaw estaba allí, claro. Habían pasado ya algunas semanas desde que se despidiera de Dorothea, pero aún conservaba su alojamiento en Middlemarch. Lydgate no ponía en general objeciones a las visitas de Ladislaw, aunque en aquel momento le molestó la imposibilidad de desahogar su corazón. Al abrir la puerta los dos cantantes siguieron con su interpretación, alzando los ojos y mirándolo, desde luego, pero sin considerar su entrada una interrupción. Para un hombre tan angustiado por las presiones exteriores como el pobre Lydgate, no resultaba consolador ver a dos personas trinando para él al llegar a casa con la sensación de que un día penoso le tenía aún reservados sufrimientos adicionales. Su rostro, más pálido ya de lo habitual, adquirió una expresión ceñuda mientras cruzaba la habitación y se dejaba caer en un sillón.

Los cantantes, sintiéndose disculpados por el hecho de que solo habían dejado tres compases por interpretar, se volvieron hacia él.

—¿Qué tal, Lydgate? —dijo Will, adelantándose para estrecharle la mano.

Lydgate aceptó la mano que se le ofrecía, pero no consideró necesario contestar.

—¿Has cenado, Tertius? Te esperaba mucho más pronto —dijo Rosamond, que ya se había dado cuenta de que su marido estaba de «pésimo humor» y fue a sentarse, mientras hablaba, en su sitio habitual.

—He cenado, sí. Querría un poco de té, por favor —respondió Lydgate lacónicamente, todavía con aire ceñudo y mirándose con detenimiento las piernas, extendidas hacia adelante.

Will era demasiado rápido para necesitar nada más.

—Me marcho —dijo, recogiendo el sombrero.

—El té estará listo en seguida —dijo Rosamond—; haga el favor de quedarse.

—No, me voy; Lydgate está cansado —dijo Will, que entendía al médico mejor que Rosamond y no se sentía ofendido por sus modales, imaginándose fácilmente causas exteriores de incomodidad.

—Esa es una razón más para que se quede usted —dijo Rosamond, con aire travieso y con su acento más frívolo—; no volverá a dirigirme la palabra en lo que queda de velada.

—Sí que lo haré, Rosamond —dijo Lydgate, con su sonora voz de barítono—. Tengo que hablar contigo de un asunto importante.

Aquella forma de introducir el tema no podía estar más en desacuerdo con las intenciones de Lydgate; pero la actitud indiferente de su mujer había sido demasiado irritante.

—¿No se lo decía yo? —exclamó Will—. Me voy a la reunión sobre el instituto para los obreros.[127] Hasta la vista. —Y salió rápidamente de la habitación.

Rosamond, sin mirar a Lydgate, se levantó en seguida y fue a ocupar su sitio ante la bandeja del té. Estaba pensando que nunca había visto a su marido tan desagradable. Lydgate volvió los ojos hacia ella mientras manejaba delicadamente el servicio del té con sus manos de dedos largos y esbeltos; y observó que, pese a contemplar los objetos que tenía delante sin que se alterara una sola de sus facciones, había en su rostro un indescriptible aire de protesta contra las personas de modales desagradables. Lydgate olvidó por unos momentos sus heridas, lanzándose a una repentina reflexión sobre la nueva forma de impasibilidad femenina que ponía de manifiesto aquella apariencia de sílfide, apariencia que él había interpretado en otros tiempos como signo de una sensibilidad despierta e inteligente. Pensando en Laure mientras miraba a Rosamond, se dijo interiormente: «¿Llegaría a matarme si le resultara demasiado fastidioso?», y a continuación: «Todas las mujeres son iguales». Pero la capacidad de generalizar que permite a los hombres equivocarse con mucha mayor amplitud que a los animales irracionales, halló su contrapeso en el recuerdo del comportamiento de otra mujer: los gestos y el emocionado tono de voz de Dorothea al hablar de su marido cuando Lydgate empezó a atenderlo; sus súplicas apasionadas para que se le dijera qué proporcionaría mayor bienestar a aquel hombre por quien parecía dispuesta a sofocar cualquier impulso, excepto las exigencias de la fidelidad y de la compasión. Mientras se hacía el té, aquellas imágenes revividas atravesaron rápidamente, casi como parte de un ensueño, el pensamiento de Lydgate. Había cerrado los ojos en el último instante de contemplación mientras oía decir a Dorothea: «Aconséjeme… piense qué es lo que puedo hacer… mi marido ha estado esforzándose toda la vida, mirando siempre hacia el futuro. No le interesa ninguna otra cosa… ni tampoco a mí».

Aquella voz de una feminidad profundamente espiritual había permanecido dentro de Lydgate como lo habían hecho las concepciones luminosas de genios ya muertos y canonizados (¿acaso no hay un genio para los sentimientos nobles que también reina sobre los espíritus humanos y sobre sus conclusiones?); la entonación de aquella voz era una música de la que se iba alejando… De hecho, se había quedado dormido unos momentos cuando Rosamond, con su habitual manera de hablar suave y neutral, dijo:

—Aquí tienes el té, Tertius —colocándolo en una mesita a su lado y volviendo luego a ocupar su sitio sin mirarlo. Lydgate era injusto al acusarla de insensibilidad; a su manera, Rosamond era suficientemente sensible y las impresiones que recibía difícilmente llegaban a borrarse. En aquel momento se sentía ofendida y rechazaba a Lydgate con todo su ser. Como, por otra parte, nunca fruncía el entrecejo ni alzaba la voz, estaba convencida de que nadie tenía motivos válidos para censurarla.

Quizá Lydgate y ella nunca se habían sentido tan lejos el uno del otro; pero había poderosas razones para no posponer la revelación, incluso aunque el joven médico no la hubiese iniciado ya con aquel brusco anuncio; de hecho, parte del deseo colérico de lograr que Rosamond reaccionara ante su crítica situación, deseo que le había empujado a hablar antes de tiempo, aún seguía vivo junto con el dolor que le producía la perspectiva de apesadumbrarla. Lydgate esperó a que desapareciera la bandeja del té, a que se encendieran los candelabros y reinara ya la quietud de la velada: el intervalo dio tiempo a que la ternura ahuyentada volviera a ocupar el viejo cauce. Lydgate habló con amabilidad.

—Rosy, cariño, deja tu labor y ven a sentarte a mi lado —le pidió dulcemente, apartando la mesa y estirando un brazo para acercar una silla a su sillón.

Rosamond obedeció. Al acercarse a él, con su vestido de muselina transparente suavemente coloreada, su figura esbelta aunque redondeada nunca había parecido más llena de gracia; al sentarse a su lado y poner una mano sobre el brazo del sillón, mirándolo por fin sin apartar la vista, su delicado cuello y su mejilla y sus bien moldeados labios nunca habían hecho gala de una mayor proporción de esa belleza sin mancha que a todos nos conmueve, y que es característica de la primavera y de la infancia y de todo lo que tiene el encanto de la lozanía. También ahora conmovió a Lydgate, mezclando con todos los otros recuerdos que salían a la superficie en aquellos momentos tan difíciles los primeros momentos de su amor por ella. El joven médico colocó suavemente su mano, más grande, sobre la de su mujer, diciendo: «¡Querida!» con las

dilatadas resonancias que el afecto comunica a esa palabra. También Rosamond se hallaba aún bajo el influjo de aquel mismo pasado, y su marido era todavía en parte el Lydgate que en otro tiempo la hacía feliz cuando la aprobaba. Le apartó suavemente el cabello de la frente, luego puso su otra mano sobre la de él y comprendió que le había perdonado.

—Me veo en la obligación de decirte algo que te va a doler, Rosy. Pero hay cosas que marido y mujer tienen que considerar juntos. Supongo que ya se te ha ocurrido pensar que ando mal de dinero. —Lydgate hizo una pausa; pero Rosamond giró el cuello y contempló un jarrón en la repisa de la chimenea—. No he podido pagar todas las cosas que tuvimos que comprar antes de casarnos y también me he visto obligado a hacer frente a otros gastos posteriores. El resultado es que existe una deuda importante en Brassing, trescientas ochenta libras, que lleva pesando sobre mí una buena temporada y que de hecho empeora cada día, ya que los clientes no me pagan más deprisa porque otros necesiten el dinero. Me he esforzado por ocultártelo mientras no estabas bien de salud; pero ahora debemos pensar juntos en ello y tienes que ayudarme.

—¿Qué puedo hacer yo, Tertius? —dijo Rosamond, volviendo de nuevo los ojos hacia él. Esa breve frase de cuatro palabras, como tantas otras en todos los idiomas, es susceptible, mediante diversas inflexiones vocales, de expresar todos los matices, desde la total incomprensión a una exhaustiva percepción llena de vitalidad; desde la más completa identificación con olvido del propio yo, al más neutral de los retraimientos. La débil voz de Rosamond al pronunciarlas incorporó a las palabras «¿qué puedo hacer yo?» toda la neutralidad que eran capaces de contener e hirió con un escalofrío mortal la reavivada ternura de Lydgate. El joven médico no se dejó dominar por la cólera… Sintió que se le encogía el corazón con indescriptible tristeza. Y cuando habló de nuevo fue exclusivamente con el tono de un hombre que se fuerza a cumplir una tarea.

—Es necesario que lo sepas, porque tengo que dar una garantía durante algún tiempo y ha de venir un hombre para hacer un inventario de los muebles.

Rosamond enrojeció.

—¿No le has pedido dinero a papá? —dijo, tan pronto como recobró el habla.

—No.

—¡En ese caso lo haré yo! —exclamó, apartando sus manos de las de su marido y levantándose para situarse a dos metros de distancia.

—No, Rosy —dijo Lydgate con firmeza—. Es demasiado tarde para eso. El inventario empezará mañana. Recuerda que se trata tan solo de una garantía; nada va a cambiar: es un asunto pasajero. Insisto en que tu padre no debe saberlo, a no ser que yo decida informarle personalmente —añadió, con acento decididamente autoritario.

Eran palabras muy poco amables, y es que Rosamond había logrado que su marido se sintiera lleno de temores sobre lo que ella sería capaz de hacer lanzada por el camino de una silenciosa y decidida desobediencia. A ella, la falta de amabilidad de Lydgate le pareció imperdonable: no lloraba con facilidad y le desagradaba hacerlo, pero ahora la barbilla y los labios empezaron a temblarle y los ojos se le humedecieron. Quizá era imposible que Lydgate, sometido a la doble presión de las dificultades materiales exteriores y de la orgullosa resistencia personal a sus humillantes consecuencias, se imaginara plenamente lo que aquella tribulación repentina suponía para una criatura que nunca había conocido más que la satisfacción de sus caprichos y cuyos sueños se orientaban siempre hacia nuevos caprichos, aún más de acuerdo con sus gustos. Lydgate deseaba herir lo menos posible sus sentimientos, y las lágrimas de su mujer le llegaron al corazón. No pudo volver a hablar en seguida; Rosamond, por su parte, no siguió sollozando; trató de superar su turbación y se secó las lágrimas, sin dejar de mirar hacia la repisa de la chimenea.

—No te aflijas, cariño —dijo Lydgate, mirándola. Que Rosamond hubiera elegido apartarse de él en aquel momento de aflicción hacía que todo resultase más difícil de decir, pero había que llegar hasta el final —. Hemos de ser fuertes y hacer todo lo necesario. Soy yo quien ha tenido la culpa: debería haber comprendido que no me era posible vivir de esta manera. Muchas cosas se han vuelto contra mí en el ejercicio de la profesión y es cierto que ahora me encuentro en un punto muy bajo. Es posible que todo se arregle, pero mientras tanto tenemos que frenar… tenemos que cambiar nuestro modo de vivir. Será necesario capear el temporal. Una vez que haya dado esa garantía, tendré tiempo para examinar con más calma nuestra situación y tú eres tan inteligente que, si decides interesarte por la administración, podrás darme lecciones para que tenga más cuidado. Me he portado como un estúpido por no preocuparme de que cuadraran las cuentas… Vamos, querida, siéntate a mi lado y perdóname.

Lydgate estaba inclinando el cuello bajo el yugo como una criatura provista de garras, pero también de razón, lo que a menudo nos lleva a la mansedumbre. Al oírle pronunciar las últimas palabras con tono

suplicante, Rosamond volvió a ocupar la silla situada a su lado. Que su marido se echara la culpa de todo le daba ciertas esperanzas de que atendiese a lo que ella tenía que decir.

—¿Por qué no retrasas la confección del inventario? Solo hace falta despedir mañana a los hombres cuando vengan.

—No voy a decirles que se vayan —respondió Lydgate, con tono que volvía a ser autoritario. ¿De qué servía explicarle las cosas a Rosamond?

—Si nos marchamos de Middlemarch habrá que vender, por supuesto, y eso será prácticamente lo mismo.

—No nos vamos a marchar de Middlemarch.

—Estoy segura, Tertius, de que sería mucho mejor. ¿Por qué no nos vamos a Londres? O a los alrededores de Durham, donde tu familia es bien conocida.

—No podemos ir a ningún sitio sin dinero, Rosamond.

—Tus parientes no permitirían que estuvieses sin dinero. Y sin duda esos comerciantes odiosos podrían entenderlo y esperar, si les dieras las explicaciones oportunas.

—Todo es inútil, Rosamond —dijo Lydgate, enfadado—. Tienes que aprender a aceptar mis decisiones en cuestiones que no entiendes. He hecho los arreglos necesarios y hay que llevarlos a cabo. En cuanto a mis parientes, no espero nada de ellos y nada les pediré.

Rosamond no hizo el menor gesto. Pensaba que, si hubiera sabido cómo iba a comportarse, nunca se habría casado con Lydgate.

—No tenemos tiempo que perder en palabras innecesarias, querida —dijo Lydgate, procurando de nuevo mostrarse amable—. Hay algunos detalles que quiero examinar contigo. Dover dice que aceptaría quedarse con buena parte de la cubertería y cualquiera de las joyas de las que consideremos oportuno desprendernos. En realidad se está portando muy bien.

—¿Es que vamos a tener que pasarnos sin cucharas ni tenedores? —dijo Rosamond, cuyos labios parecían hacerse más finos al debilitársele la voz. Estaba decidida a no ofrecer más resistencia y a no hacer nuevas sugerencias.

—¡Claro que no, querida! —dijo Lydgate—. Pero mira esto —continuó, sacando un papel del bolsillo y desdoblándolo—; aquí está la cuenta de Dover. Como ves, he marcado ciertas cosas que, si las devolvemos, reducirán el total en más de treinta libras. No he señalado ninguna de las joyas. —Lydgate sentía que prescindir de las joyas le resultaba especialmente amargo; se sobrepuso, sin embargo, con razonamientos incontrovertibles. No podía proponer a Rosamond que devolviera un determinado regalo suyo, aunque se dijo que estaba obligado a darle a conocer la oferta de Dover, porque quizá un impulso interior de su mujer lo hiciera todo más fácil.

—Es inútil que mire, Tertius —dijo Rosamond con mucha calma—; devuelve lo que te parezca oportuno. —No estaba dispuesta a leer el papel y Lydgate, enrojeciendo hasta la raíz del pelo, retiró la lista y la dejó caer sobre su rodilla. Mientras tanto, Rosamond salió en silencio de la habitación, dejándolo impotente y lleno de dudas. ¿Es que no iba a volver? Daba la impresión de que se identificaba con él tan poco como si fueran criaturas de distintas especies e intereses opuestos. Movió la cabeza y hundió las manos en los bolsillos con cierta violencia. Todavía quedaba la ciencia… había metas nobles para las que trabajar. Aún tenía que hacer un esfuerzo… Necesariamente más intenso por cuanto las demás satisfacciones se desvanecían.

En seguida se abrió la puerta y volvió a entrar Rosamond. Llevaba la caja de cuero que contenía las amatistas, y un pequeño cesto de adorno con otros estuches; dejándolos sobre la silla que había ocupado antes, dijo, con extremada corrección:

—Aquí están todas las joyas que me has regalado. Puedes devolverlas si quieres, y lo mismo te digo de los cubiertos. Confío en que no quieras que me quede mañana en casa. Me iré a la de mis padres.

Para muchas mujeres la mirada que Lydgate le lanzó habría sido mucho más terrible que otra de indignación: había en ella una aceptación desesperanzada de la distancia que Rosamond ponía entre los dos.

—Y ¿cuándo regresarás? —dijo, con una nota de amargura en la voz.

—A la hora de cenar. Por supuesto, no hablaré de este asunto con mamá. —Rosamond estaba convencida de que ninguna mujer podía comportarse de manera más irreprochable; y fue a sentarse de nuevo en su mesa de trabajo. Lydgate se quedó meditando un minuto o dos y el resultado fue que dijo, con algo de la antigua emoción:

—Puesto que somos marido y mujer, Rosy, no deberías dejarme solo cuando se presenta la primera dificultad.

—Claro que no —dijo Rosamond—; haré todo lo que haya que hacer.

—No es correcto que se deje este asunto en manos de los criados o que me vea obligado a explicárselo. Y no tendré más remedio que salir mañana… no sé a qué hora. Comprendo que rehúyas la humillación de estas cuestiones de dinero. Pero, mi querida Rosamond, tratándose de un asunto de amor propio, que yo siento tanto como puedas sentirlo tú, sin duda es mejor que nos ocupemos nosotros y que los criados participen lo menos posible; y puesto que eres mi mujer, no hay manera de evitar tu parte en mi ignominia… si tal ignominia existe.

Rosamond no contestó inmediatamente, pero finalmente dijo:

—De acuerdo, me quedaré en casa.

—No voy a tocar las joyas, Rosy. Llévatelas. Pero voy a hacer una lista de los cubiertos que podemos devolver y que habrá que empaquetar para enviarlos.

—Los criados se enterarán de eso —dijo Rosamond, con un toque casi imperceptible de sarcasmo.

—Bien, debemos aceptar algunas cosas desagradables que son imprescindibles. Me gustaría saber dónde está la tinta —dijo Lydgate, levantándose y arrojando la factura sobre la mesa más grande, donde tenía intención de escribir.

Rosamond fue a buscar el tintero y después de colocarlo en la mesa se disponía a marcharse cuando Lydgate, que estaba de pie muy cerca, la rodeó con el brazo y la atrajo hacia sí, diciendo:

—Vamos, cariño, pongamos al mal tiempo buena cara. Confío en que solo tengamos que ser tacaños y escrupulosos durante una temporada. Dame un beso.

Resultaba muy difícil ahogar su bondad natural, y parte de la hombría de bien de un marido es lamentar vivamente que una muchacha inexperta encuentre dificultades por haberse casado con él. Rosamond recibió el beso de Lydgate y se lo devolvió sin ganas, y de esa manera se restableció de momento una apariencia de mutuo acuerdo. Pero Lydgate no pudo evitar mirar con temor las inevitables discusiones futuras sobre gastos y sobre la necesidad de un completo cambio en su forma de vivir.

Capítulo LIX

Decían antiguamente que el Alma tiene forma humana,
aunque más pequeña, más sutil que el yo carnal,
y así podía salir a tomar el aire cuando le apetecía.
Y ¡mira! junto a su rostro de querubín flota
una forma etérea de pálidos labios, murmurando
sugerencias en la diminuta concha de su oído.

Las noticias se difunden con frecuencia de manera tan irreflexiva pero tan eficaz como ese polen que las abejas transportan (sin tener idea de lo cargadas que van) cuando se lanzan en busca de su néctar preferido. Esta excelente comparación hace referencia a Fred Vincy, que durante su visita a la rectoría de Lowick oyó una animada conversación entre las señoras acerca de lo que Tantripp había dicho a su vieja criada sobre la extraña mención del señor Ladislaw en un codicilo añadido a su testamento por el señor Casaubon poco antes de morir. La señorita Winifred se quedó muy sorprendida al descubrir que su hermano ya estaba al corriente de aquel hecho, e hizo notar que Camden tenía una capacidad fuera de lo común para saber cosas y no contarlas; después de lo cual Mary Garth dijo que tal vez el codicilo se había mezclado con las costumbres de las arañas, de las que la señorita Winifred nunca quería saber nada. A la señora Farebrother se le ocurrió que quizá aquella noticia estaba relacionada con el hecho de que el señor Ladislaw solo les hubiese hecho una visita en la rectoría y la señorita Noble dejó escapar muchos maulliditos compasivos.

Fred sabía muy poco y se interesaba aún menos por Ladislaw y los Casaubon, y su pensamiento nunca volvió a ocuparse de aquella conversación hasta que un día, al llevar un recado a Rosamond de parte de su madre, vio salir a Ladislaw de su casa. Fred y su hermana tenían muy poco que decirse desde que el matrimonio había evitado a esta todo roce con la desagradable realidad que son los hermanos, y especialmente desde que él había dado lo que ella consideraba el paso estúpido, e incluso reprobable, de renunciar a la Iglesia y dedicarse a una profesión como la del señor Garth. De aquí que Fred hablara con preferencia de lo que consideraba noticias sin importancia y mencionara «*à propos* del joven Ladislaw» lo que había oído en la rectoría de Lowick.

Ahora bien, Lydgate, como el señor Farebrother, sabía muchas más cosas de las que decía, y una vez que empezó a pensar en las relaciones de Will y Dorothea, sus conjeturas fueron más allá de los hechos. Imaginó la existencia de un apasionado afecto por ambas partes y aquello le pareció algo demasiado serio para convertirlo en tema de habladurías. Recordó la susceptibilidad de Will cuando le habló de la señora Casaubon y eso le hizo aún más circunspecto. En conjunto, sus deducciones, unidas a los hechos que ya conocía, aumentaron su afecto y su tolerancia hacia Ladislaw, haciéndole comprender las vacilaciones que lo llevaban a quedarse en Middlemarch después de haber dicho que debería marcharse. Un detalle significativo de la distancia mental entre Lydgate y Rosamond era que el primero no había sentido la necesidad de hablar con su mujer sobre aquel tema: el joven médico no confiaba en la discreción de su esposa. Y estaba en lo cierto; aunque no preveía cómo actuaría Rosamond en caso de que fuera impulsada a hablar.

Cuando Rosamond repitió ante Lydgate las noticias de Fred, su marido dijo:

—No se te ocurra hacerle la menor insinuación a Ladislaw, Rosy. Es muy posible que estalle como si lo hubieras insultado. Por supuesto que es un asunto muy penoso.

Rosamond torció el cuello y se arregló el pelo, convertida en la imagen de la más tranquila indiferencia.

Pero la primera vez que Will fue a su casa en ausencia de Lydgate, habló con socarronería de que Ladislaw hubiera retrasado su marcha a Londres.

—Lo sé todo. Tengo un pajarito que me ha hecho confidencias —dijo, logrando que su cabeza quedara especialmente favorecida al asomar por encima de la labor que levantaban sus activos dedos—. Existe un imán muy poderoso en estos alrededores.

—Sin duda alguna. Nadie lo sabe mejor que usted —dijo Will, con fácil galantería, pero interiormente dispuesto a enfadarse.

—Se trata sin duda de la más encantadora de las aventuras románticas: el señor Casaubon, celoso, prevé que no habrá otra persona con quien la señora Casaubon desee casarse, ni nadie a quien le gustaría tanto casarse con ella como cierto caballero y urde un plan para estropearlo todo obligándola a renunciar a sus propiedades si se casa con el caballero en cuestión… y luego… no me cabe la menor duda de que el final será completamente romántico.

—¡Dios del cielo! ¿De qué está usted hablando? —dijo Will, enrojeciendo hasta las orejas; las facciones se le alteraron como si hubiese sufrido una violenta sacudida—. No bromee; explíqueme qué es lo que quiere decir.

—¿De verdad no lo sabe? —dijo Rosamond, abandonando el tono travieso y sin otro deseo que contárselo todo cuanto antes para ver qué efecto tenía.

—¡No! —replicó él, lleno de impaciencia.

—¿No sabe que el señor Casaubon dice en su testamento que si la señora Casaubon se casa con usted, tendrá que renunciar a todas sus propiedades?

—¿Cómo sabe que eso es verdad? —dijo Will, con gran vehemencia.

—Mi hermano Fred lo oyó en casa de los Farebrother.

Will se levantó de la silla y tendió la mano hacia el sombrero.

—Creo que para la señora Casaubon es usted más importante que las propiedades —dijo Rosamond, mirándolo desde lejos.

—Por favor, no hable más de eso —exclamó Will, con voz muy baja y ronca, muy distinta de la suya habitual—. Es un insulto abominable tanto para ella como para mí. —Luego volvió a sentarse con aire ausente, mirando al frente sin ver nada.

—Ahora se ha enfadado conmigo —dijo Rosamond—. Es usted injusto. Tendría que estarme agradecido por habérselo contado.

—Y lo estoy —dijo Will, bruscamente, con esa especie de desdoblamiento característico de las personas dormidas que responden a una pregunta.

—Confío en tener noticias de la boda —dijo Rosamond, recobrando el tono travieso.

—¡Nunca! ¡Jamás tendrá noticias de esa boda!

Con aquellas palabras, pronunciadas de manera impetuosa, Will se puso en pie, ofreció la mano a Rosamond todavía con aire de sonámbulo y abandonó la habitación.

Cuando se hubo marchado, Rosamond dejó su asiento y fue andando hasta el otro extremo de la habitación, apoyándose al llegar allí contra una cómoda con espejo y mirando por la ventana con aire fatigado. Se sentía agobiada por el aburrimiento y por esa insatisfacción que en el espíritu de las mujeres se transforma continuamente en celos triviales, sin fundamento de ninguna clase, surgidos únicamente de las vagas exigencias del egoísmo y capaces, sin embargo, de impulsar tanto a la acción como a las palabras. «No hay nada que merezca la pena», dijo la pobre Rosamond para sus adentros, pensando en la familia de Quallingham, que no le escribía; y en que quizá Tertius al llegar a casa la importunara con el asunto de los gastos. Ya le había desobedecido a sus espaldas, pidiendo al señor Vincy que los ayudase, pero su padre se había negado en redondo, diciendo: «Es más probable que sea yo quien necesite ayuda».

Capítulo LX

Las buenas frases, sin duda, son, y siempre han sido, muy dignas de elogio.

JUEZ SHALLOW[128]

Pocos días después —era ya finales de agosto— se produjo un acontecimiento que causó cierta agitación en Middlemarch: todo el mundo, si así lo deseaba, iba a tener la oportunidad de comprar, bajo los distinguidos auspicios del señor Borthrop Trumbull, muebles, libros y cuadros pertenecientes al señor Edwin Larcher, que, como todo el mundo podía ver al consultar el catálogo, eran los mejores en cada uno de esos apartados. No se trataba de una subasta motivada por la crisis del comercio; obedecía, por el contrario, al gran éxito del señor Larcher en los negocios, que le había permitido adquirir una mansión cerca de Riverston, amueblada con gran lujo por el ilustre médico de un balneario, y en cuyo comedor colgaban incluso cuadros de gran tamaño con personajes que escandalizaron a la señora Larcher por encontrarse en distintos grados de desnudez, aunque el escándalo desapareció al averiguar que las pinturas representaban escenas bíblicas. De aquí la excelente oportunidad de comprar los objetos tan bien descritos en el catálogo distribuido por el señor Borthrop Trumbull, cuyos conocimientos de historia del arte le permitían afirmar que los muebles del vestíbulo, que iban a subastarse sin el requisito de un precio mínimo, incluían una talla de un contemporáneo de Gibbons[129].

En aquellos tiempos una buena subasta se consideraba en Middlemarch algo muy parecido a una fiesta. Había una mesa provista con los mejores fiambres, comparables a los que se servían en los funerales de primera; y también se daban facilidades para el abundante consumo de bebidas euforizantes, que quizá propiciaran generosas y animadas pujas por artículos de escaso interés. El buen tiempo aún hacía más atractiva la subasta de las pertenencias del señor Larcher, porque la casa se hallaba situada precisamente en un extremo de la población, con jardín y establos anexos, cerca de la bonita salida de Middlemarch conocida como la carretera de Londres, que era también el camino para el hospital nuevo y para Los Arbustos, la apartada residencia de señor Bulstrode. En resumen, la subasta era a todos los efectos como una feria y atrajo a miembros de todas las clases sociales con tiempo libre a su disposición: para algunos, que se arriesgaban a pujar por el placer de hacer subir los precios, era casi como apostar en las carreras. El segundo día, cuando iban a subastarse los mejores muebles, estaba «todo el mundo»; el mismo señor Thesiger, rector de St Peter, hizo una corta visita, deseoso de comprar una mesa tallada, y estuvo codo con codo con el señor Bambridge y el señor Horrock. También había un ramillete de señoras de Middlemarch instaladas en sillas en torno a la gran mesa del comedor; el señor Borthrop Trumbull, por su parte, presidía desde una plataforma con escritorio y martillo; las hileras posteriores, donde abundaban los rostros masculinos, se modificaban con frecuencia debido a las entradas y salidas que se producían tanto por la puerta como a través del amplio mirador que daba al césped del jardín.

«Todo el mundo» no incluía en aquella ocasión al señor Bulstrode, cuya salud no soportaba bien ni las aglomeraciones ni las corrientes. Pero su mujer había manifestado deseos de adquirir determinado cuadro: una *Cena de Emaús*, atribuida en el catálogo a Guido[130]; y en el último momento, antes del día de la subasta, el señor Bulstrode hizo una visita a las oficinas del *Pionero* —del que era ahora uno de los propietarios— para pedir al señor Ladislaw como un gran favor que tuviera la amabilidad de hacer uso de sus notables conocimientos artísticos en favor de la señora Bulstrode y calibrara el valor de aquel cuadro en particular… «si —añadió el meticuloso y cortés banquero— la asistencia a la subasta no obstaculiza los

preparativos para su marcha, que según mis noticias es inminente».

Aquella salvedad podría haber tenido resonancias satíricas en los oídos de Will si hubiese estado de humor para interesarse por tales matices, ya que hacía referencia a un acuerdo concertado muchas semanas antes con los propietarios del periódico, según el cual Ladislaw tendría libertad, el día que quisiera, para hacer entrega de la administración al subdirector que había estado formando, puesto que su deseo era dejar Middlemarch definitivamente. Pero la vaga perspectiva de satisfacer unas ambiciones tiene poca fuerza frente a la comodidad de hacer lo habitual o lo agradable; y todos sabemos que es difícil cumplir una resolución cuando anhelamos en secreto que sea innecesaria. En tales situaciones hasta las personas más incrédulas tienden íntimamente al milagro: resulta imposible imaginar cómo podrían realizarse nuestros deseos, pero… ¡cosas tan maravillosas han sucedido! Will no se confesaba aquella debilidad, pero retrasaba la partida. ¿De qué servía ir a Londres en aquella época del año? Los antiguos alumnos de Rugby que podían acordarse de él no estaban en la ciudad; y para escribir de política, prefería seguir unas pocas semanas más con el *Pionero*. Sin embargo, mientras hablaba con el señor Bulstrode, sintió que se reforzaba su decisión de partir y también de ver una vez más a Dorothea antes de hacerlo. De ahí que contestara que tenía razones para retrasar un poco su marcha y que asistiría con gusto a la subasta.

Will adoptó una actitud desafiante, espoleado por la idea de que cuando la gente lo miraba disponía con toda probabilidad de una información que lo señalaba como un individuo de intenciones rastreras que había que frustrar poniendo determinadas propiedades fuera de su alcance. Como la mayoría de las personas que defienden su libertad frente a clasificaciones convencionales, estaba preparado para un inmediato y veloz enfrentamiento con cualquiera que insinuara que tenía razones personales para esa defensa, que había en su sangre, en sus modales o en su carácter algo que él ocultaba enmascarándolo como opinión. Cuando le asaltaba esa desagradable sospecha, iba por la vida durante días con gesto desafiante, cambiando de color bajo la piel transparente, alerta como un centinela, atento a cualquier cosa sobre la que tuviera que lanzarse.

Aquel aire desafiante resultó muy llamativo durante la subasta y quienes solo lo hubiesen conocido en sus estados de ánimo de amable excentricidad o de júbilo radiante se habrían quedado sorprendidos ante el contraste. No lamentó contar con aquella ocasión de aparecer en público ante las tribus de los Toller, los Hackbutt y todos los demás, que lo miraban con desprecio por ser un aventurero y vivían, sin embargo, en un estado de brutal ignorancia respecto a Dante… que se mofaban de su ascendencia polaca, aunque ellos pertenecieran a una raza muy necesitada de cruzar su sangre. Se situó de pie en un lugar muy visible no lejos del subastador, con un dedo índice en cada bolsillo y la cabeza echada hacia atrás, sin esforzarse por hablar con nadie, aunque había sido cordialmente recibido en su calidad de experto por el señor Trumbull, encantado con aquella nueva oportunidad de desplegar sus grandes dotes de persuasión.

Y sin duda alguna, entre los hombres con una vocación que les exige utilizar toda su capacidad oratoria, el más feliz es un próspero subastador de provincias que aprecia sin reservas sus propios chistes y el valor de sus conocimientos enciclopédicos. Algunas personas taciturnas y avinagradas quizá vean con malos ojos tener que insistir una y otra vez en los méritos de todos los artículos, desde un calzador a un cuadro de Berghem[131], pero el señor Borthrop Trumbull llevaba un líquido amable en las venas; era entusiasta por naturaleza y le hubiera gustado tener al universo bajo su martillo, convencido de que obtendría por él un precio más elevado gracias a sus elogios.

Pero de momento los muebles del salón de la señora Larcher le bastaban. Cuando Will Ladislaw hizo su aparición, una segunda pantalla para chimenea, de la que se dijo que había sido olvidada en el lugar más conveniente, reclamó de repente el entusiasmo del subastador, entusiasmo que él distribuía aplicando el equitativo principio de alabar sobre todo las cosas que estaban más necesitadas de elogios. La pantalla era de acero bruñido, con calados en forma de lanceta y bordes muy afilados.

—Ahora, señoras —dijo—, voy a dirigirme a ustedes. Aquí tenemos una pantalla que en cualquier otra subasta difícilmente habría sido ofrecida sin ciertas reservas, por ser, si se me permite decirlo dada la calidad del acero y lo peculiar del diseño, un objeto —aquí el señor Trumbull bajó la voz, la cual adquirió un tono levemente nasal, al tiempo que se pasaba un dedo de la mano izquierda por la cara— que tal vez no encaje con los gustos corrientes. Permítanme decirles que a la larga este estilo artesanal será el único de moda… ¿Ha dicho usted media corona? Gracias… Ofrecen media corona por esta pantalla tan singular; y dispongo de informes particulares que me permiten afirmar que el estilo antiguo es actualmente muy solicitado en las altas esferas. Tres chelines… tres y seis peniques… ¡levántalo bien, Joseph! Contemplen, señoras, la pureza del diseño… ¡Personalmente no tengo la menor duda de que es un producto del siglo pasado! ¿Cuatro chelines, señor Mawmsey? Cuatro chelines.

—No me gustaría ponerla en el salón —dijo la señora Mawmsey, en voz suficientemente alta para

advertencia de su imprudente marido—. No sé qué pensar de la señora Larcher. La cabeza de cualquier pobre niño que se diera contra eso se abriría en dos. Los bordes son como cuchillos.

—Muy cierto —replicó el señor Trumbull con gran rapidez—, y es bien útil tener a mano una pantalla que corte, si tienen ustedes un cordón de cuero o un trozo de cuerda que haga falta cortar y no aparece el cuchillo: muchos hombres se han quedado colgando por falta de un cuchillo que los hiciera caer. Caballeros, aquí tenemos una pantalla que si tuvieran ustedes la desgracia de colgarse les liberaría en un abrir y cerrar de ojos… y con asombrosa celeridad… Cuatro y seis peniques… Cinco, cinco y seis peniques… Muy apropiado para una habitación de huéspedes donde hubiera una cama con cuatro columnas y un invitado un poco mal de la cabeza… Seis chelines… Gracias, señor Clintup… Ofrecen seis chelines… seis chelines… ¡adjudicado! —La mirada del subastador, que había estado buscando a su alrededor, con sensibilidad preternatural, el menor síntoma de nuevas ofertas, al llegar a aquel punto bajó la vista hacia el papel que tenía delante y su voz descendió también a un tono indiferentemente expeditivo mientras decía —: Señor Clintup. Échale una mano, Joseph.

—Merecía la pena gastarse seis chelines por una pantalla de la que siempre se puede contar ese chiste — dijo el señor Clintup a su vecino riendo en voz baja y como pidiendo disculpas. El señor Clintup era propietario de un vivero, hombre distinguido en su profesión pero desconfiado, y temía que las personas presentes pudieran considerar descabellada su oferta.

Mientras tanto Joseph había presentado una bandeja llena de objetos de poco tamaño.

—Ahora, señoras —dijo el señor Trumbull, alzando uno de los artículos—, esta bandeja contiene un exquisito surtido: una colección de bagatelas para la mesa del salón… y las bagatelas son el compendio de las cosas humanas… nada más importante que las bagatelas… sí, señor Ladislaw, sí, a la larga… Pero haz que la bandeja pase de mano en mano, Joseph… Examinen ustedes esas joyas, señoras. Lo que tengo en la mano es un ingenioso artefacto… una especie de acertijo práctico, lo llamaría yo: así, como ustedes ven, parece una elegante caja en forma de corazón, portátil, de bolsillo; así, en cambio, se convierte en una espléndida flor doble… un adorno para la mesa; y ahora… —el señor Trumbull permitió que la flor se transformara de forma alarmante en sartas de hojas con forma de corazón— ¡en un libro de acertijos! No menos de quinientos, impresos en hermoso color rojo. Caballeros, si yo fuera un hombre menos escrupuloso, no querría que hicieran ustedes ofertas muy elevadas por este lote… También a mí me gustaría quedarme con él. ¿Qué hay que pueda promover mejor que un acertijo una alegría inocente y diría que incluso la misma virtud? Los acertijos evitan el lenguaje irreverente y facilitan el trato con personas refinadas del sexo contrario. Este ingenioso artefacto por sí solo, sin el elegante dominó, cesta para cartas, etcétera, debería bastar para obtener un precio elevado por el lote. Puede lograr que cualquier persona que lo lleve en el bolsillo sea bien recibida en las reuniones sociales. ¿Cuatro chelines, señor? Cuatro chelines por esta notable colección de acertijos con todo lo demás. Aquí hay un ejemplo: «Soy consultor de las damas y por ellas muy querido; nunca digo la verdad ni en mentira me han cogido». Respuesta: el espejo. ¿Verdad que está muy bien? Se trata de una diversión para aguzar el entendimiento; es picante… tiene lo que llamamos sátira e ingenio sin indecencia. Cuatro y seis peniques… Cinco chelines.

Las ofertas se sucedían con entusiasmo creciente. El señor Bowyer fue uno de los que pujaron y eso resultaba exasperante. No estaba en condiciones de permitírselo y tan solo quería evitar que otro hombre hiciera buen papel. La corriente arrastró incluso al señor Horrock, pero aquel comprometerse con una opinión se produjo con tan escaso sacrificio en la neutralidad de sus facciones, que quizá la oferta no hubiera sido reconocida como suya de no haber sido por las amistosas imprecaciones del señor Bambridge, que quería saber qué iba a hacer Horrock con aquellas bagatelas dignas tan solo de merceros llegados al estado de perdición que el tratante de caballos descubría con tanta cordialidad en la mayoría de las existencias humanas. El lote quedó finalmente adjudicado por una guinea al señor Spilkins, un joven Slender[132] de la zona, que usaba sin ton ni son el dinero que tenía para gastos y que consideraba un defecto importante su falta de memoria para los acertijos.

—Vamos, Trumbull, ya está bien… Lleva usted demasiado tiempo con tonterías para solteronas — murmuró el señor Toller, acercándose al subastador—. Quiero ver qué ofrecen por los grabados y tengo que marcharme pronto.

—Inmediatamente, señor Toller. Ha sido tan solo un acto de benevolencia que su noble corazón aprobará sin duda. ¡Joseph! Trae en seguida los grabados… lote 235. Ahora los expertos entre ustedes van a disfrutar mucho. Aquí tenemos una escena que representa al duque de Wellington rodeado de su estado mayor en Waterloo; y a pesar de recientes acontecimientos[133] que han enturbiado, por así decirlo, la fama de nuestro gran héroe, me atreveré a decir… porque un hombre de mi profesión no debe dejarse arrastrar por los vientos de la política… que un tema más noble… dentro del orden moderno, perteneciente a nuestro

tiempo y a nuestra misma época… difícilmente puede concebirlo el entendimiento humano: los ángeles tal vez, pero no los hombres, señores, no los hombres.

—¿Quién lo pintó? —dijo el señor Powderell, muy impresionado.

—Se trata de una prueba realizada antes de que se hiciera ninguna inscripción en la plancha del grabado, señor Powderell… No se conoce el nombre del pintor —contestó Trumbull, con cierto jadeo en la voz al pronunciar las últimas palabras, después de lo cual frunció los labios y miró a su alrededor.

—¡Ofrezco una libra! —dijo el señor Powderell, con tono emocionado pero decidido, de hombre dispuesto a ponerse en la brecha. Ya fuera por respetuoso temor o por compasión, nadie trató de subir el precio.

A continuación vinieron los dos grabados holandeses por los que el señor Toller tenía tanto interés, y en cuanto los hubo adquirido se marchó. Otros grabados y después algunos cuadros se vendieron a personas importantes de Middlemarch que habían acudido pensando especialmente en ellos y también se produjo un mayor movimiento entre el público, tanto de entradas como de salidas; algunos que ya habían comprado lo que querían, se marcharon; otros aparecieron por primera vez o regresaron después de una visita a las vituallas colocadas bajo la tienda de campaña en el jardín. Aquella tienda de campaña era lo que el señor Bambridge tenía intención de comprar, y parecía gustarle examinar con frecuencia su interior, como saboreando de antemano su posesión. La última vez que regresó al comedor procedente de allí, se le vio trayendo consigo a un nuevo acompañante: un desconocido para el señor Trumbull y para todos los demás, pero cuya apariencia, sin embargo, llevaba a suponer que pudiera tratarse de un pariente del tratante de caballos… inclinado como él a los excesos en la bebida. Sus largas patillas, imponente contoneo y vaivén de piernas hacían de él una figura llamativa; pero su traje negro, bastante raído, obligaba a sacar la conclusión de que no estaba tan en condiciones de excederse en la bebida como él hubiera deseado.

—¿Quién es ese individuo, Bam? —le preguntó el señor Horrock en un aparte.

—Pregúnteselo usted mismo —replicó Bambridge—. Dice que acaba de llegar.

El señor Horrock examinó al desconocido, que se apoyaba en su bastón con una mano y que usaba un mondadientes con la otra al mismo tiempo que recorría la habitación con la vista, dejando traslucir cierto desasosiego, visible pese al silencio que le imponían las circunstancias.

Finalmente se procedió a la subasta de la *Cena de Emaús*, con inmenso alivio de Will, tan cansado ya de aquel trámite que se había retirado un poco, apoyando el hombro contra la pared precisamente detrás del subastador. Ahora se acercó de nuevo y sus ojos se tropezaron con el llamativo extraño que, para considerable sorpresa suya, lo miraba con insistencia. Pero Will se vio interpelado de inmediato por el señor Trumbull.

—Sí, señor Ladislaw, sí; esto le interesa como experto, creo yo. Es un placer —prosiguió el subastador con creciente entusiasmo— presentar un cuadro como este ante tan distinguida asamblea de damas y caballeros: un cuadro por el que una persona cuyas posibilidades económicas estén a la altura de su buen juicio puede pagar cualquier suma. Se trata de un óleo de la escuela italiana… pintado por el celebrado Guydo, el pintor más grande del mundo, el primero de los antiguos maestros, como se los llama… imagino que porque fueron capaces de hacer una cosa o dos más que la mayoría de nosotros… porque estaban en posesión de secretos perdidos para la mayor parte de la humanidad. Permítanme decirles, caballeros, que he visto muchos cuadros de los antiguos maestros y que no todos llegan a la altura de este… Algunos son más oscuros de lo estrictamente necesario y no todos los temas resultan apropiados para una familia. Pero aquí tenemos a Guydo… El marco por sí solo ya vale algunas libras… Un cuadro que cualquier señora se sentiría orgullosa de colgar en su casa… Una obra adecuada para el refectorio de una institución caritativa, si algún caballero de la Corporación desease dar una muestra de su munificencia. ¿Que lo vuelva un poco, señor? Sí, Joseph, vuélvelo un poco hacia el señor Ladislaw… El señor Ladislaw, que ha viajado por el Continente, entiende el mérito de estas cosas como podrán ustedes observar.

Todos los ojos se volvieron por un momento hacia Will, que dijo con frialdad:

—Cinco libras.

El subastador prorrumpió en recriminaciones.

—¡Ah! ¡Señor Ladislaw! El marco solo ya las vale. ¡Señoras y caballeros, por el prestigio de esta ciudad! Supongan que se descubra en el futuro que una joya del arte ha estado entre nosotros y ninguno de los habitantes de Middlemarch se ha percatado de ello. Cinco guineas… cinco libras siete chelines y seis peniques… cinco con diez. ¡Más, señoras, más! Es una joya e «innúmeras joyas», como dice el poeta[134], han sido adquiridas a un precio simbólico por la simple razón de que el público no estaba al tanto, porque se ofrecieron en círculos donde existía… iba a decir escasez de sentimientos, pero ¡no!… Seis libras… seis guineas… Un Guydo de primer orden a punto de ser adjudicado por seis guineas… es un insulto a la

religión, señoras; nos concierne a todos como cristianos, caballeros, que un tema como este se adjudique a un precio tan bajo… Seis libras diez… siete…

Las ofertas se sucedían con rapidez y Will siguió participando, dado el interés que la señora Bulstrode tenía por el cuadro, seguro de que podía estirar el precio hasta doce libras. Finalmente consiguió que se le adjudicara por diez guineas, después de lo cual se abrió paso hacia el mirador que daba al jardín y salió de la casa. Optó por dirigirse a la tienda de campaña en busca de un vaso de agua, porque tenía calor y estaba sediento: no había ningún otro visitante y le pidió a la mujer que atendía el recinto que le consiguiera un poco de agua fresca. Luego, cuando ya se disponía a marcharse, se vio desagradablemente sorprendido por la aparición del rubicundo desconocido que antes lo había mirado con tanta fijeza. En aquel momento a Will se le ocurrió que quizá fuera uno de esos parásitos políticos con gran capacidad para hincharse, que en una o dos ocasiones habían insistido en ser conocidos suyos por el simple hecho de haberle oído hablar sobre la cuestión de la reforma y que quizá pensara obtener un chelín a cambio de alguna noticia. Desde ese punto de vista, el desconocido, ya de por sí bastante poco grato de ver en un día de verano, resultaba aún mucho más desagradable; y Will, sentado a medias en el brazo de una silla de jardín, apartó la vista de manera muy deliberada. El señor Raffles, sin embargo, no dio la menor importancia a aquel gesto, ya que nunca dudaba en llamar la atención de los demás si ello favorecía sus propósitos. De manera que procedió a avanzar uno o dos pasos hasta colocarse delante de Will y dijo con voz muy alta y muy deprisa:

—Perdóneme, señor Ladislaw… ¿acaso su madre se llamaba Sarah Dunkirk?

Will, poniéndose en pie, dio un paso atrás, frunció el entrecejo y respondió con cierta fiereza:

—Así es, efectivamente. ¿Y eso a usted qué le importa?

Formaba parte del modo de ser de Will que el primer chispazo que arrojaba fuese una respuesta directa a la pregunta y un desafío a sus consecuencias. Decir primero: «¿Y eso a usted qué le importa?» habría parecido como andarse con rodeos… ¡como si le importara que se supieran sus orígenes!

Raffles, por su parte, no tenía ningún deseo de llegar a la confrontación que implicaba el aire amenazador de Ladislaw. Aquel joven esbelto de tez delicada parecía un gato montés dispuesto a abalanzarse sobre él. En semejantes circunstancias, el señor Raffles era capaz de aplazar el placer que le producía molestar al prójimo.

—¡No es mi intención ofenderle, señor mío, ni mucho menos! Me acuerdo de su madre… La conocí cuando era muchacha. Pero son los rasgos de su padre los que ha heredado usted. También tuve el placer de conocer a su padre. ¿Viven aún los dos, señor Ladislaw?

—¡No! —tronó Will, con la misma actitud que antes.

—Me agradaría mucho serle útil, señor Ladislaw… ¡Ya lo creo que sí! Espero que nos veamos de nuevo.

A continuación, Raffles, que se había quitado el sombrero mientras pronunciaba las últimas palabras, dio media vuelta con un marcado vaivén de piernas y se alejó. Will se lo quedó mirando un momento y vio que no volvía a la habitación donde se celebraba la subasta, sino que parecía dirigirse hacia la carretera. Por un instante pensó que había hecho una tontería impidiéndole seguir hablando; ¡pero no! En conjunto prefería pasarse sin cualquier información que procediera de aquella fuente.

A última hora de la tarde, sin embargo, Raffles lo alcanzó en la calle y, dando la impresión de haber olvidado la brusquedad con que había sido acogido la primera vez o de querer resarcirse mediante una indulgente familiaridad, lo saludó de manera jovial y fue andando a su lado, haciendo al principio observaciones sobre los atractivos de la ciudad y de toda la zona. Will sospechó que su interlocutor había bebido copiosamente y estaba considerando cómo librarse de él cuando Raffles dijo:

—Yo también he estado en el extranjero, señor Ladislaw… y he visto mundo… Hablaba incluso un poco de francés. Fue en Boulogne donde vi a su padre… usted se parece mucho a él, ¡ya lo creo que sí! Boca… nariz… ojos… el pelo echado hacia atrás de la misma manera que él… un poco al estilo extranjero. John Bull no se inclina mucho en esa dirección. Pero su padre estaba muy enfermo cuando lo vi. ¡Señor, señor! Unas manos casi transparentes. Usted no era más que un crío muy pequeño. ¿Se puso bien?

—No —respondió Will secamente.

—¡Ah! ¡Vaya! Me he preguntado con frecuencia qué habría sido de su madre. Se escapó de casa cuando era muy joven… con mucho amor propio y ¡muy bonita, desde luego! Sé la razón de su huida —dijo Raffles, guiñando un ojo lentamente mientras miraba de reojo a Will.

—Usted no sabe nada deshonroso sobre ella, señor mío —dijo Will, volviéndose hacia él con bastante ferocidad.

—¡Ni lo más mínimo! —dijo el otro, agitando la cabeza con gran decisión—. Era demasiado buena para que le gustaran sus familiares… ¡eso fue lo que pasó! —Aquí Raffles volvió a guiñar un ojo lentamente—. Yo estaba al tanto de todo lo que hacían, se lo aseguro… Se movían en lo que podría llamarse la línea de los

ladrones respetables… peristas con mucho estilo… nada clandestino ni bajo cuerda… todo de primera clase. Un establecimiento muy elegante y ganancias elevadas sin duda alguna. Pero, ¡claro!, Sarah no hubiese sabido nunca nada… Una muchacha tan elegante… educada en el mejor internado para señoritas… digna de ser la esposa de un lord… solo que Archie Duncan se lo contó todo por despecho, porque no quiso saber nada de él. De manera que se escapó de casa. Yo viajaba para ellos, ¿sabe usted?, como un caballero… y con muy buen sueldo. Al principio no les importó que se hubiera escapado… personas muy religiosas, sí señor, muy religiosas… y su madre de usted quería dedicarse al teatro. El hijo varón vivía por entonces y la hija estaba de más. ¡Eh!, ya hemos llegado al Toro Azul. ¿Qué dice usted, señor Ladislaw? ¿Le parece que entremos y nos tomemos una jarra de cerveza?

—No; me veo obligado a darle las buenas noches —dijo Will, dirigiéndose hacia una bocacalle que desembocaba en Lowick Gate y echando casi a correr para ponerse fuera del alcance de Raffles.

Caminó durante un buen rato por la carretera de Lowick alejándose de la ciudad y agradeció la oscuridad sin estrellas cuando cayó la noche. Tenía la impresión de que le habían arrojado basura encima entre gritos de desprecio. Había un dato que apoyaba las afirmaciones de aquel individuo: su madre no le había dicho nunca por qué razón se escapó de casa.

¡De acuerdo! ¿En qué salía él, Will Ladislaw, perjudicado, suponiendo que la verdad sobre su familia fuese lo más desagradable posible? Su madre había afrontado todas las penalidades para desvincularse de los suyos. Pero si los parientes de Dorothea hubiesen estado al tanto de aquella historia —si Chettam lo hubiera sabido— habrían podido cargar las tintas, encontrando un motivo magnífico para juzgarlo indigno de acercarse a la señora Casaubon. Que sospecharan lo que les apeteciera: acabarían por descubrir su error. Terminarían por saber que la sangre que corría por sus venas estaba tan libre de vileza como la de ellos.

Capítulo LXI

> Dos afirmaciones contradictorias —contestó Imac— no pueden ser ambas ciertas, pero atribuidas al ser humano quizá sean verdad.
>
> *Rasselas, príncipe de Abisinia*[135]

Aquella misma noche, cuando el señor Bulstrode regresó de un viaje de negocios a Brassing, su excelente esposa le salió al encuentro en el vestíbulo y lo condujo a la sala de estar reservada para el dueño de la casa.

—Nicholas —dijo, fijando en él, intranquila, una mirada llena de sinceridad—, un hombre muy desagradable ha estado aquí preguntando por ti… y ha hecho que me sintiera muy incómoda.

—¿Qué clase de persona, querida? —preguntó el señor Bulstrode, adivinando ya la dolorosa respuesta.

—Un individuo de rostro colorado con grandes patillas y unos modales de lo más insolente. Ha asegurado ser un viejo amigo tuyo y ha dicho que sentirías no verlo. Quería esperarte aquí, pero lo he convencido para que hablara contigo en el banco mañana por la mañana. ¡Nunca he visto a nadie más desvergonzado!… Se quedó mirándome y dijo que su amigo Nick tenía suerte con las esposas. Creo que no se hubiera marchado de no haber sido por *Blucher*, que rompió la cadena y vino corriendo por el camino de grava… porque yo estaba en el jardín; de manera que le dije: «Será mejor que se marche… Este perro es muy feroz y no soy capaz de sujetarlo». ¿Es cierto que conoces a un hombre así?

—Creo que sé de quién se trata, querida —dijo el señor Bulstrode, con su habitual voz apagada—; es un pobre sinvergüenza al que ayudé mucho en otros tiempos. Imagino, sin embargo, que no volverá a molestarme. Irá probablemente al banco… para mendigar, sin duda alguna.

Nada más se dijo sobre aquel tema hasta el día siguiente, cuando el señor Bulstrode, después de regresar de la ciudad, se estaba vistiendo para la cena. Su mujer, dudando de que hubiera vuelto a casa, fue a mirar en su vestidor y lo vio sin chaqueta ni corbata, con un brazo apoyado en el armario y contemplando el suelo con aire ausente. El señor Bulstrode se sobresaltó y levantó la vista al entrar ella.

—Tienes muy mal aspecto, Nicholas. ¿Te sucede algo?

—Me duele bastante la cabeza —dijo el señor Bulstrode, cuyas frecuentes enfermedades justificaban que su mujer aceptara siempre aquella causa de abatimiento.

—Siéntate y déjame que te dé friegas con vinagre.

El señor Bulstrode no tenía ninguna necesidad del vinagre, pero las afectuosas atenciones de su mujer contribuyeron a tranquilizarlo. Aunque normalmente se mostraba cortés, tenía por costumbre recibir tales atenciones con frialdad, como si se tratara de una simple obligación conyugal. Aquel día, sin embargo, mientras ella se inclinaba sobre él, dijo: «Eres muy buena, Harriet», con un tono que tenía algo de nuevo para los oídos de su esposa; la señora Bulstrode no supo exactamente en qué consistía la novedad, si bien su solicitud femenina le hizo concebir de inmediato la sospecha de que su marido estaba a punto de enfermar.

—¿Es que hay algo que te preocupa? —dijo—. ¿Ha ido ese hombre a verte al banco?

—Sí; y era lo que me había imaginado. Es un individuo que hace años pudo alcanzar una posición mejor. Pero se ha convertido en un pobre borracho disoluto.

—¿Se ha ido definitivamente? —preguntó la señora Bulstrode con voz llena de ansiedad; pero, sin saber muy bien por qué, se abstuvo de añadir: «Fue muy desagradable oírle llamarse amigo tuyo». En aquel momento no hubiese querido decir nada que manifestara su convencimiento de que los anteriores lazos

familiares de su marido no estaban a la altura de los suyos. No es que supiera mucho acerca de aquella época de la vida del señor Bulstrode. Que su marido estuvo primero empleado en un banco, que a continuación se dedicó a lo que él llamaba negocios, que hizo fortuna antes de cumplir los treinta y tres años y que se casó con una viuda mucho mayor que él —una disidente y en otros aspectos poseedora probablemente de todos los detestables inconvenientes de una primera esposa cuando se los examina con la desapasionada objetividad de la segunda—, era prácticamente todo lo que había tenido interés en saber más allá de los vislumbres que daban de cuando en cuando los relatos del señor Bulstrode sobre su temprano gusto por la religión, sus deseos de convertirse en predicador y su relación con actividades filantrópicas y misioneras. La señora Bulstrode lo consideraba un hombre excelente, de piedad muy destacada tratándose de un seglar, responsable de que ella hubiese adoptado una actitud más seria ante la vida y que, además, con su aportación de bienes materiales al matrimonio, había mejorado su posición social. Pero también le gustaba pensar que había sido bueno en todos los sentidos para el señor Bulstrode conseguir la mano de Harriet Vincy, de familia excelente de acuerdo con las luces de Middlemarch… luces sin duda mejores que las de las calles de Londres o las de las capillas no conformistas. La mentalidad provinciana no reformada desconfiaba de Londres; y si bien la verdadera religión tenía poder salvador en cualquier sitio, la buena de Harriet Bulstrode estaba convencida de que salvarse dentro de la Iglesia era más respetable. Por ello, en sus relaciones con otras personas, deseaba tanto ignorar que su marido había sido alguna vez un disidente londinense, que le gustaba mantenerlo oculto incluso cuando hablaba con él. El señor Bulstrode se percataba de ello; de hecho, en algunos aspectos temía bastante a aquella candorosa mujer suya, cuya piedad aprendida e innato amor por la vida social eran igualmente sinceros; que no tenía nada de que avergonzarse; y con la que se había casado debido al afecto que sentía por ella y que aún seguía intacto. Sus temores eran los característicos de un hombre a quien le preocupa conservar su reconocida supremacía: la pérdida de la gran consideración en que lo tenía su mujer, o la de cualquier otra persona que no le odiara por enemistad con la verdad, sería para él el principio del fin. Cuando ella preguntó: «¿Se ha ido definitivamente?», él contestó: «Confío en que así sea», haciendo un esfuerzo para dar a su tono de voz toda la serenidad y despreocupación posibles.

En realidad el señor Bulstrode estaba muy lejos de sentirse tranquilo. Durante la entrevista en el banco, Raffles había dejado muy claro que su deseo de atormentar era casi tan intenso como su avaricia. Explicó con toda franqueza que había dado un rodeo ex profeso para llegarse hasta Middlemarch, con el fin de echar una ojeada por los alrededores y ver si la zona le convenía para instalarse allí. Era cierto que había tenido que pagar más deudas de lo esperado, pero las doscientas libras no se habían esfumado aún: veinticinco más le bastarían para salir del paso de momento. Lo que deseaba sobre todo era ver a su amigo Nick y a su familia e informarse mejor sobre la prosperidad de un hombre al que se sentía muy ligado. Con el tiempo quizá volviera para quedarse una larga temporada. Esta vez Raffles no accedió a que «se le acompañara hasta la salida», como él decía… Se negó a abandonar Middlemarch bajo la mirada de Bulstrode. Tenía intención de marcharse en la diligencia al día siguiente… si lo consideraba oportuno.

Bulstrode se sentía impotente. Ni amenazas ni halagos iban a servir de nada: no cabía contar con miedos duraderos ni con promesas de ningún tipo. Tenía por el contrario en su corazón la fría seguridad de que Raffles —a no ser que la Providencia le enviara la muerte para impedírselo— volvería a Middlemarch antes de que pasara mucho tiempo. Y aquella certeza lo aterrorizaba.

No es que hubiera peligro de que lo condenaran en juicio o de que perdiese su fortuna: el peligro era tan solo que quedaran expuestos a la opinión de sus vecinos y a la dolorida percepción de su mujer ciertos hechos de su vida pasada que lo convertirían en objeto de burla y motivo de oprobio para la religión con la que tan diligentemente se había asociado. El terror a ser juzgado aguza la memoria: ilumina con inevitable claridad ese pasado tanto tiempo oculto que solo se recuerda de ordinario con algunas frases de carácter general. Incluso sin contar con la memoria, la vida queda unificada por una zona de dependencia entre el comienzo y el final; pero una memoria muy viva fuerza a un hombre a reconocer su pasado culpable. Cuando la memoria duele como una herida que se vuelve a abrir, el pasado de un hombre no es tan solo una historia muerta, un desvaído ensayo del presente; no es un error del que uno se ha arrepentido y que ha logrado arrancar de su vida: sigue siendo una parte estremecida de uno mismo, que provoca escalofríos y un gusto acre y la comezón de una vergüenza merecida.

El pasado de Bulstrode se alzaba ahora en esta otra, su segunda vida, y solo los placeres de entonces parecían haber perdido intensidad. Noche y día, sin interrupciones excepto de breves sueños que tejían en un presente fantástico la conciencia del pasado y el miedo, iba sintiendo cómo las escenas de su vida anterior se interponían entre él y todo lo demás, tan obstinadamente como cuando miramos a través de la ventana en una habitación con luz, en lugar de la hierba y los árboles, siguen delante de nosotros los

objetos a los que damos la espalda. Los sucesivos acontecimientos interiores y exteriores estaban allí en una sola perspectiva: aunque era posible detenerse en cada uno por separado, el resto mantenía su dominio sobre la conciencia.

Una vez más se veía a sí mismo como joven empleado bancario, persona agradable, tan diestro con las cifras como elocuente en la palabra y amante de las definiciones teológicas: un miembro eminente, aunque joven, de una iglesia disidente de Highbury, con llamativas experiencias ya en la condena del pecado y en el sentimiento del perdón. Se oía llamar de nuevo hermano Bulstrode en reuniones de fieles; se veía hablando desde tribunas religiosas, predicando en casas particulares; se veía de nuevo considerando el ministerio como posible vocación y reflexionando sobre su inclinación por las tareas de misionero. Aquella había sido la época más feliz de su vida: aquel el sitio donde ahora le hubiera gustado despertarse y descubrir que todo lo demás era un sueño. Las personas entre las que el hermano Bulstrode había alcanzado gran prestigio eran muy pocas, pero estaban muy unidas a él y le producían una satisfacción muy intensa; su influencia abarcaba un espacio muy reducido, pero sentía sus efectos con mayor intensidad. Creía sin esfuerzo en el peculiar trabajo de la gracia en su interior y en los signos de que Dios pensaba utilizarlo como un instrumento muy especial.

Luego vino el momento de transición, ligado a la conciencia de ascenso social que tuvo cuando, no siendo más que un huérfano educado para el comercio en una escuela de la beneficencia, se le invitó a la magnífica villa del señor Dunkirk, el miembro más rico de su congregación. Pronto se convirtió en íntimo de la familia, respetado por la esposa a causa de su piedad, reconocido por su talento comercial por el marido, cuya fortuna procedía de un floreciente negocio en la City y el West End de Londres. Aquello fue el arranque de una nueva corriente para su ambición, que orientó sus perspectivas de «instrumento divino» hacia la unión de notables talentos religiosos con el éxito en los negocios.

A la larga se produjo un claro estímulo exterior: un socio subalterno, dedicado a tareas confidenciales, falleció y, para cubrir aquella vacante inoportuna, nadie le pareció tan idóneo al director como su joven amigo Bulstrode, si estaba dispuesto a convertirse en contable confidencial. La oferta fue aceptada. Se trataba de una casa de empeño, de extraordinaria calidad tanto en la extensión como en los beneficios. Al cabo de muy poco tiempo Bulstrode se dio cuenta de que una fuente excepcional de ingresos era la adquisición de cualquier tipo de mercancías, sin una rigurosa investigación sobre su procedencia. La casa, de todos modos, tenía una sucursal en el West End, sin mezquindades ni puntos oscuros que pudiera sugerir nada vergonzoso.

Bulstrode recordó sus primeros momentos de duda. Nunca los compartió, aunque discutiera mucho consigo mismo, y los razonamientos adquiriesen a veces forma de oración. El negocio estaba acreditado y tenía viejas raíces; no es lo mismo abrir una taberna nueva que aceptar una participación en otra ya existente. Los beneficios obtenidos de almas perdidas… ¿dónde se puede marcar la línea divisoria en las transacciones humanas? ¿No era incluso la manera que tenía Dios de salvar a sus elegidos? «Tú sabes —había dicho entonces el joven Bulstrode, como ahora decía el Bulstrode viejo—, tú sabes que mi alma está libre de esas cosas… que las veo como instrumentos para cultivar tu jardín, rescatándolo aquí y allá de las tierras baldías».

No faltaban metáforas ni precedentes; ni tampoco peculiares experiencias espirituales que acabaron convirtiendo su permanencia en aquel puesto en un servicio que se pedía de él: ante la perspectiva de enriquecerse que se abría ante sus ojos, los escrúpulos de Bulstrode siguieron siendo íntimos. El señor Dunkirk nunca se planteó semejantes inconvenientes: nunca se le ocurrió que sus negocios tuvieran nada que ver con el plan divino de la salvación. Y lo cierto es que Bulstrode descubrió que llevaba dos vidas distintas; su actividad religiosa dejó de ser incompatible con sus negocios tan pronto como se convenció de que no tenía que verlos como incompatibles.

Rodeado de nuevo por el pasado en su imaginación, Bulstrode repetía las mismas disculpas… De hecho, había seguido dándoles vueltas a través de los años hasta lograr un considerable espesor, como de masas de telarañas, que acolchaba la sensibilidad moral; más aún, a medida que la edad hacía más ávido su egoísmo pero a él menos capaz de disfrutar, en su alma se arraigó la creencia de que trabajaba exclusivamente por Dios, sin pensar nunca en sí mismo. A pesar de ello, si pudiera situarse de nuevo en aquel punto tan lejano con su pobreza juvenil… escogería ser misionero.

Sin embargo, la cadena de causas de la que había terminado por ser prisionero siguió su curso. En la magnífica villa de Highbury no faltaban los conflictos. Años antes la hija se había escapado y desafió a sus padres dedicándose al teatro; después murió el único varón y al cabo de muy poco tiempo falleció también el señor Dunkirk. La esposa, una mujer sencilla y piadosa, dueña de todos los bienes dentro y fuera del magnífico negocio, cuyos entresijos nunca conoció con exactitud, había llegado a creer en Bulstrode,

adorándolo inocentemente como las mujeres adoran con frecuencia al sacerdote o al ministro designados por la comunidad. Fue natural que al cabo de cierto tiempo se pensara en el matrimonio. Pero la señora Dunkirk tenía escrúpulos y nostalgias en relación con su hija, a quien desde hacía mucho tiempo se consideraba perdida tanto para Dios como para sus padres. Se supo que había contraído matrimonio, aunque después desapareció por completo. Su madre, al desaparecer el hijo varón, imaginó la existencia de un nieto y sintió por partida doble deseos de recuperar a la hija. Si fuera posible hallarla, surgiría un canal para la propiedad… quizá bastante amplio, si había que hacer provisiones para varios nietos. Era preciso esforzarse por encontrarla antes de que la señora Dunkirk se casara de nuevo. Bulstrode se mostró de acuerdo; pero después de probar con anuncios y otros medios de investigación, la madre creyó que no quedaban esperanzas y consintió en casarse sin hacer reservas en el asunto de las propiedades.

La hija había aparecido; pero solo lo sabía un hombre además de Bulstrode y se le pagó para que guardara silencio y desapareciera.

Aquel era el hecho descarnado que Bulstrode no tenía más remedio que contemplar con el nítido perfil con que los actos se presentan ante un espectador. Pero para él en aquel tiempo ya tan remoto, e incluso ahora como recuerdo candente, el hecho quedaba dividido en pequeñas secuencias, cada una de ellas justificada por medio de razonamientos que parecían probar su rectitud. El camino de Bulstrode hasta entonces se había visto sancionado, creía él, por notables actos de la Providencia, señalándole la senda para que hiciera el mejor uso posible de una gran propiedad, apartándola de la depravación. La muerte y otros notables arreglos, como la confianza femenina, habían ido apareciendo en su camino; y Bulstrode se apropió de las palabras de Cromwell: «¿Llamas a esto simples hechos? ¡Que el Señor tenga piedad de ti!». Los acontecimientos eran poca cosa en comparación, pero el factor esencial seguía allí, y era que se orientaban en favor de sus fines personales. Le resultaba fácil decidir cuáles eran sus deberes con los demás averiguando los designios de Dios respecto a él. ¿Acaso podía considerarse servicio de Dios que una considerable parte de aquella fortuna pasase a manos de una mujer joven y de su marido, entregados ambos a las ocupaciones más frívolas, y dispuestos quizá a malgastarla en el extranjero en trivialidades… de unas personas que parecían hallarse al margen de cualquier camino excepcional de la Providencia? Bulstrode nunca se había dicho de antemano: «La hija no aparecerá». Sin embargo, cuando llegó el momento, ocultó su existencia; y posteriormente tranquilizó a la madre haciéndole ver que lo más probable era que la desgraciada joven hubiera pasado a mejor vida.

Hubo horas en que Bulstrode comprendió la iniquidad de su acción pero ¿cómo volver atrás? Hizo ejercicios mentales, tomó conciencia de su propia insignificancia, se apoyó en la redención y continuó su camino de instrumento de los designios divinos. Y al cabo de cinco años la muerte vino de nuevo a ensanchar su camino, llevándose a su mujer. Fue retirando gradualmente el capital, pero no hizo los sacrificios necesarios para poner fin al negocio, que siguió por espacio de trece años hasta que finalmente se vino abajo. Mientras tanto, Nicholas Bulstrode había usado sus cien mil libras discretamente, convirtiéndose en un prohombre provinciano de sólida fortuna: banquero, hombre de iglesia, benefactor público; también socio secreto de firmas comerciales, en las que su habilidad se orientaba a la economía en las materias primas, como en el caso de los tintes que echaban a perder la seda del señor Vincy. Y ahora, después de aquella inalterada respetabilidad por espacio de casi treinta años —cuando todo lo que la había precedido llevaba mucho tiempo inmovilizado en su conciencia—, surgía el pasado, apoderándose de sus pensamientos como la terrible irrupción de un nuevo sentido que suponía una carga desmesurada para su existencia debilitada.

Mientras tanto, en su conversación con Raffles, Bulstrode había sabido algo de mucha importancia, algo que entraba activamente en el forcejeo entre sus anhelos y terrores. Allí, pensó, había una oportunidad para la salvación espiritual, quizá incluso para la restitución material.

El componente espiritual era una auténtica necesidad para Bulstrode. Quizá haya hipócritas groseros, que conscientemente fingen creencias y emociones sin otro fin que engañar al mundo, pero Bulstrode no era uno de ellos. Era simplemente un hombre cuyos deseos habían sido más fuertes que sus creencias y que había justificado gradualmente la realización de estos deseos mediante un satisfactorio acuerdo con esas creencias. Si eso es hipocresía, se trata de un proceso que se da de cuando en cuando en todos nosotros, cualquiera que sea la confesión a la que pertenezcamos y tanto si creemos en la futura perfección de nuestra raza como en la posibilidad de fijar una fecha muy próxima para el fin del mundo; tanto si consideramos la tierra como un medio de cultivo en putrefacción, refugio de unos pocos elegidos, incluidos nosotros, como si creemos apasionadamente en la solidaridad humana.

Los servicios que podía prestar a la causa de la religión habían sido a lo largo de su vida el motivo alegado por Bulstrode ante su conciencia para justificar sus actos, el motivo siempre presente en sus

oraciones. ¿Quién podría usar el dinero y la posición social mejor de lo que él estaba decidido a hacerlo? ¿Quién podía superarle en desprecio propio y exaltación de la causa divina? Y para el señor Bulstrode la causa de Dios era algo distinto de la rectitud de su conducta: exigía un reconocimiento de los enemigos de Dios, que habían de ser utilizados meramente como instrumentos y a los que también convendría, dentro de lo posible, privar de dinero y de la consiguiente influencia. Del mismo modo, inversiones provechosas en negocios donde el poder del príncipe de este mundo echaba mano de sus mejores estratagemas, quedaban santificadas mediante una aplicación correcta de los beneficios en manos de un servidor de Dios.

Este razonamiento implícito no es esencialmente más característico de las creencias evangélicas que el uso de frases grandilocuentes por motivos sórdidos en el caso de los ingleses considerados como pueblo. No existe doctrina general que no sea capaz de comerse nuestra moralidad si no se ve contrarrestada por un hábito muy arraigado de sentimientos auténticos de solidaridad con otros seres humanos de carne y hueso.

Un hombre que cree en algo distinto de su propia avaricia tiene necesariamente una conciencia o unas normas a las que más o menos procura adaptarse. La norma de Bulstrode había sido su capacidad de servicio a la causa de Dios: «Soy pecador y no soy nada… una vasija para ser consagrada por el uso… pero ¡utilízame!». Ese había sido el molde en el que había encerrado su inmensa ansia de ser alguien importante y con capacidad para imponerse. Y ahora había llegado un momento en que el molde parecía en peligro de romperse y perder toda utilidad.

¿Qué pasaría si los actos que había dado por buenos, al transformarlo a él en instrumento poderoso de la gloria divina, se convirtieran en pretexto para el escarnio y sirvieran para oscurecer la gloria del Todopoderoso? Si era esa la decisión de la Providencia, se vería expulsado del templo igual que alguien que ha presentado ofrendas impuras.

Bulstrode llevaba años utilizando en su interior expresiones de arrepentimiento. Y ahora había surgido una ocasión de expiación que tenía un sabor mucho más amargo y en la que una Providencia amenazadora le exigía un tipo de propiciación que no era simplemente una transacción doctrinal. El tribunal divino había cambiado de aspecto para él; la humillación interior no bastaba ya y tenía que presentarse con la restitución en la mano. Bulstrode se disponía a intentar de verdad ante su Dios la restitución que consideraba factible: un gran temor se había apoderado de su frágil cuerpo y la proximidad cruel de la vergüenza despertó en él una necesidad espiritual. Día y noche, mientras el pasado amenazador, recién recuperado, intranquilizaba su conciencia, Bulstrode pensaba en los medios para recuperar la paz y la confianza… en los sacrificios que necesitaba hacer para detener el castigo. En esos momentos de temor quería convencerse de que, si espontáneamente hacía algo justo, Dios lo salvaría de las consecuencias de sus iniquidades. Porque la religión solo puede cambiar cuando cambian las emociones que la configuran; y la religión del miedo personal sigue estando casi al nivel de la del salvaje.

Bulstrode había visto con sus propios ojos a Raffles marchándose en la diligencia de Brassing y ello suponía un alivio; hacía desaparecer el peso de un temor inmediato, pero no ponía fin al conflicto espiritual ni a la necesidad de obtener amparo. Finalmente el banquero tomó una decisión difícil y escribió una carta a Will Ladislaw, suplicándole que acudiera a su casa a las nueve de la noche para entrevistarse con él. A Will no le sorprendió de manera especial aquella petición, relacionándola con alguna nueva idea sobre el *Pionero*; pero cuando se le introdujo en la salita del señor Bulstrode, le sorprendió el aire de total agotamiento que reflejaba el rostro del banquero, y ya se disponía a decir: «¿Está usted enfermo?» cuando, al darse cuenta de la brusquedad de semejante pregunta, se limitó a interesarse por la señora Bulstrode y por su reacción ante el cuadro adquirido en la subasta.

—Muchas gracias, está muy contenta; ha salido con nuestras hijas a pasar la velada fuera de casa. Le he pedido que viniera, señor Ladislaw, porque deseo hacerle una comunicación de carácter muy personal… diría casi de naturaleza confidencial, incluso sagrada. Imagino que nada ha estado tan lejos de su imaginación como la existencia de importantes lazos en el pasado que pudieran vincular nuestras biografías.

Will sintió algo parecido a una descarga eléctrica. Se encontraba ya, en ese asunto de los lazos con el pasado, en un estado de hipersensibilidad y de agitación apenas controlada, y sus presentimientos no tenían nada de agradable. Parecían como las fluctuaciones de un sueño… como si la acción iniciada por el desconocido vociferante y abotagado fuese a proseguir de la mano de aquella encarnación de la respetabilidad de ojos sin brillo y aspecto enfermizo, cuyo tono apagado y palabras desenvueltas y ceremoniosas le resultaban casi tan repulsivas como las del otro interlocutor, que aún recordaba con toda claridad. Al contestar, lo hizo con un marcado cambio de color en el rostro.

—No, desde luego, en absoluto.

—Tiene usted delante, señor Ladislaw, a un hombre afligido. De todos modos, si no fuera por las

exigencias de la conciencia y el conocimiento de que me hallo ante el tribunal de Aquel que ve como no ve ningún hombre, no tendría necesidad de hacer las revelaciones que son el motivo de que haya reclamado su presencia aquí esta noche. Por lo que a las leyes humanas se refiere, carece usted por completo de cualquier derecho sobre mí.

Will se sentía incluso más incómodo que sorprendido. El señor Bulstrode había hecho una pausa y miraba al suelo con la cabeza apoyada en una mano. Pronto, sin embargo, fijó de nuevo en Will su mirada inquisitiva y dijo:

—He sabido que su madre se llamaba Sarah Dunkirk y que huyó de su casa para dedicarse al teatro. También se me ha informado de que su padre llegó a estar muy consumido por la enfermedad. ¿Puedo preguntarle si está usted en condiciones de confirmar esos hechos?

—Sí, todo eso es verdad —dijo Will, sorprendido del momento elegido para llevar a cabo aquel examen, que lógicamente debería haber precedido a las anteriores insinuaciones del banquero. Pero el señor Bulstrode seguía el orden de sus emociones; no abrigaba la menor duda de que había llegado el momento de la restitución y un irresistible impulso lo llevaba a expresiones de arrepentimiento para exorcizar el castigo.

—¿Conoce usted datos concretos sobre la familia de su madre? —continuó.

—No; no le gustaba hablar de ella. Mi madre era una persona muy generosa y honorable —dijo Will, casi enojado.

—No es mi intención alegar nada contra ella. ¿Nunca le habló de su madre?

—Le oí decir que, en su opinión, mi abuela ignoraba los motivos que la obligaron a marcharse de su casa. Decía «pobre madre» con un tono lleno de compasión.

—Su abuela se convirtió en mi esposa —dijo Bulstrode y luego hizo una leve pausa antes de añadir—: tiene usted unos derechos sobre mí, señor Ladislaw; como ya he dicho antes, no se trata de derechos legales, pero sí de otros que mi conciencia reconoce. Yo me enriquecí gracias… a ese matrimonio… resultado que probablemente no se hubiera producido (desde luego no en la misma medida) si su abuela hubiese encontrado a su hija. Esa hija, por lo que he sabido, ha abandonado ya este mundo.

—Así es —dijo Will, sintiendo con tanta fuerza cómo sospecha y repugnancia se alzaban dentro de él, que, sin darse por completo cuenta de lo que hacía, cogió el sombrero del suelo y se puso en pie. Su impulso interior era rechazar el parentesco recién descubierto.

—Haga el favor de sentarse, señor Ladislaw —dijo Bulstrode, muy agitado—. Sin duda se ha visto usted sorprendido por lo repentino de esta revelación. Pero le suplico que sea paciente con alguien que se encuentra ya muy abrumado por tribulaciones interiores.

Will volvió a sentarse, sintiendo cierta compasión que era en parte desprecio por aquel voluntario rebajarse de un hombre de avanzada edad.

—Mi deseo, señor Ladislaw, es reparar la pérdida sufrida por su madre. Sé que carece usted de fortuna y quiero proveerle como es debido utilizando unos bienes que probablemente serían ya suyos si su abuela hubiera estado segura de que su madre seguía viva y hubiese sido capaz de encontrarla.

El señor Bulstrode hizo una pausa. Tenía la impresión de estar llevando a cabo un admirable acto de finura de espíritu a los ojos de su interlocutor y también un gesto penitencial ante los de Dios. Carecía del menor indicio sobre el estado de ánimo de Will Ladislaw, irritado como se hallaba a raíz de las transparentes insinuaciones de Raffles y estimulada su innata rapidez para atar cabos por el temor a unos descubrimientos que hubiera preferido guardar para siempre en la oscuridad. Will permaneció unos momentos en silencio, hasta que el señor Bulstrode, que al final de sus palabras había bajado los ojos, los alzó de nuevo con una mirada inquisitiva, que su interlocutor recogió de pleno, diciendo:

—Supongo que estaba usted al tanto de que mi madre vivía aún y sabía dónde encontrarla.

Bulstrode acusó el impacto: su rostro y sus manos se estremecieron visiblemente. No se hallaba preparado en absoluto para que sus sugerencias encontraran aquella respuesta, ni para que se le exigiesen mayores revelaciones de las que él había considerado necesario dar. Pero en aquel momento no se atrevió a mentir y de repente descubrió que ya no se sentía seguro del terreno por el que hasta entonces había avanzado con cierta confianza.

—No voy a negar que su suposición es exacta —respondió, con una vacilación en la voz—. Y deseo compensarle por la pérdida sufrida por mi culpa. Confío en que calibre usted mis intenciones, señor Ladislaw, que hacen referencia a una justicia por encima de la humana y, como ya he dicho anteriormente, con total independencia de cualquier obligación legal. Estoy dispuesto a reducir mis propios recursos y el futuro de mi familia comprometiéndome a proporcionarle quinientas libras al año durante el resto de mi vida y a dejarle un capital en proporción a la hora de mi muerte… a hacer incluso más, si más fuese

necesario para cualquier proyecto laudable que pueda usted abrigar. —El señor Bulstrode había descendido a aquellos detalles con la esperanza de que tuvieran un efecto inmediato sobre Ladislaw, ahogando cualquier otro sentimiento en una corriente de gratitud.

Pero Will conservó un aire terriblemente obstinado, con los labios apretados y las manos en los bolsillos de la chaqueta. No se sentía conmovido en lo más mínimo y dijo con voz firme:

—Antes de que conteste a sus propuestas, señor Bulstrode, tengo que pedirle que me responda a un par de preguntas. ¿Tuvo usted relación con el negocio mediante el cual llegó a acumularse esa fortuna de la que habla?

El señor Bulstrode pensó al instante: «Raffles se lo ha contado». ¿Cómo negarse a responder cuando había ofrecido voluntariamente la información que daba pie a aquella pregunta?

—Sí —respondió.

—Y ¿era o no era ese negocio… una empresa totalmente deshonesta… más aún, no se trataba de una actividad que, de haberse hecho pública su naturaleza, podría haber colocado a las personas relacionadas con ella al nivel de los ladrones y de los presidiarios?

El tono de Will tenía un amarga dureza: se sentía obligado a formular sus preguntas con toda la crudeza posible.

Bulstrode enrojeció, lleno de incontenible ira. Estaba preparado para una escena de autodegradación, pero su orgullo y su hábito de dominio desbancaron a sus deseos de penitencia, e incluso a sus temores, al ver cómo aquel joven, a quien se había propuesto ayudar, se volvía contra él con actitud de juez.

—El negocio se creó antes de que yo entrara en él, señor mío, y no es usted quién para iniciar una investigación de ese tipo —respondió, sin alzar la voz, pero con tono desafiante.

—Sí; sí que lo soy —dijo Will, levantándose de nuevo con el sombrero en la mano—. Es asunto muy de mi incumbencia hacer tales preguntas cuando he de decidir si tendré tratos con usted y si aceptaré su dinero. Mi honor es importante para mí. Es importante para mí que no haya mancha alguna ni en mi nacimiento ni en mi familia. Y ahora descubro que existe una mancha sobre la que carezco de control. Mi madre la sintió y trató de mantenerse lo más alejada que pudo de ella; lo mismo voy a hacer yo. Guárdese ese dinero de origen tan turbio. Si yo tuviera fortuna propia, se la entregaría con gusto a cualquiera que pudiese probar la falsedad de lo que usted me ha dicho. Pero he de agradecerle que haya guardado ese dinero hasta ahora, cuando estoy en condiciones de rechazarlo. Un hombre debe saber si es un caballero recurriendo a su propia conciencia. Buenas noches.

Bulstrode se disponía a hablar, pero Will abandonó la habitación con gran rapidez y un instante después la puerta principal se había cerrado tras él. Un apasionado sentimiento de rebeldía contra aquella mancha heredada que había llegado tan de repente a su conocimiento le invadía hasta tal punto que apenas estaba en condiciones de preguntarse si había sido demasiado duro con Bulstrode; si había mostrado una arrogancia despiadada con un hombre de sesenta años que hacía, para redimirse, unos esfuerzos que el paso del tiempo había vuelto completamente inútiles.

Ninguna tercera persona que hubiera escuchado aquella conversación habría podido entender por completo lo impetuoso de la negativa de Will o la amargura de sus palabras. Nadie excepto él sabía hasta qué punto todo cuanto afectaba al sentimiento de su propia dignidad tenía una inmediata repercusión sobre sus relaciones con Dorothea y con el trato que el señor Casaubon le había dado. Y entre el cúmulo de impulsos que lo llevaron a rechazar aquel ofrecimiento estaba la seguridad de que le habría sido imposible decirle a Dorothea que lo había aceptado.

En cuanto a Bulstrode… cuando Will se hubo marchado sufrió una violenta reacción y lloró como una mujer. Era la primera vez que se enfrentaba con una expresión manifiesta de desprecio por parte de un hombre más respetable que Raffles; y, junto con aquel desprecio, que se extendía con la rapidez de un veneno por todo su organismo, estaba la ausencia de cualquier posibilidad de consuelo. Pero fue preciso cortar el alivio de las lágrimas. Su mujer y sus hijas regresaron en seguida de la charla de un misionero que había vuelto de Oriente y se lamentaron de que no hubiera oído de primera mano las interesantes cosas que a continuación se esforzaron por contarle.

Quizá, entre todos sus pensamientos ocultos, lo que más capacidad tenía para tranquilizar al señor Bulstrode era saber que Will Ladislaw no se sentiría muy inclinado a dar publicidad a lo sucedido aquella noche en su casa.

Capítulo LXII

Era un caballero de humilde linaje,
que amaba a la hija del duque de Hungría.

Viejo romance

Will Ladislaw estaba ya completamente decidido a ver a Dorothea por última vez y a abandonar sin tardanza Middlemarch. Al día siguiente de la penosa entrevista con Bulstrode, escribió una breve carta a la señora Casaubon explicándole cómo diferentes causas le habían retenido en la ciudad más de lo previsto y pidiendo permiso para hacerle una visita en Lowick a la hora que ella le indicase del primer día que tuviera disponible, ya que tenía muchas ganas de marcharse, pero no quería hacerlo hasta que ella le concediera una entrevista. Dejó la carta en el despacho del *Pionero*, encargándole al recadero que la llevase a Lowick Manor y esperase la respuesta.

Ladislaw comprendía los inconvenientes de solicitar otra vez unas palabras de despedida. Su anterior adiós, en presencia de sir James Chettam, había sido anunciado como definitivo, incluso al mismo mayordomo. Resulta sin duda arduo para la propia dignidad reaparecer cuando no se nos espera: una primera despedida tiene un contenido patético, pero volver una segunda vez abre el camino a la comedia y era posible incluso que flotaran ya en el ambiente amargos comentarios despectivos sobre los motivos de Will para retrasar su marcha. Sin embargo, resultaba en conjunto más satisfactorio para sus sentimientos solicitar una entrevista que emplear cualquier subterfugio para dar un aire de casualidad a un encuentro que quería que la señora Casaubon entendiera como ardientemente deseado. Al despedirse de ella la vez anterior, Will ignoraba hechos que daban una nueva dimensión a su relación y ponía entre ellos una distancia mucho mayor de lo que había creído. Ladislaw no sabía nada de la fortuna personal de Dorothea y, al estar poco acostumbrado a reflexionar sobre semejantes cuestiones, daba por sentado que, de acuerdo con las disposiciones del señor Casaubon, casarse con él significaría para ella que aceptaba quedarse sin un céntimo. Eso era algo que no podía desear siquiera en lo más íntimo de su corazón, incluso aunque Dorothea hubiese estado dispuesta a aceptar por él una situación tan desfavorable. A todo aquello había que añadir, además, el dolor punzante de las revelaciones sobre la familia de su madre, que en el caso de llegar a conocerse constituirían una nueva razón para que los deudos de Dorothea lo consideraran completamente indigno de ella. La secreta esperanza de que, al cabo de unos años, pudiera regresar con el convencimiento de que al menos su valor personal era en cierto modo comparable con la fortuna de ella, parecía ahora la nebulosa prolongación de un sueño. Aquel cambio justificaba sin duda la solicitud de que Dorothea lo recibiese una vez más.

Pero aquella mañana la señora Casaubon no estaba en Lowick Manor y no recibió la nota de Will. Debido a una carta de su tío en la que este le anunciaba su intención de regresar a casa al cabo de una semana, se había acercado a Freshitt Hall para comunicar la noticia, y desde allí se trasladó después a Tipton Grange para transmitir ciertas órdenes que el señor Brooke le había comunicado… pensando, como él decía, que «un poco de actividad mental es bueno para una viuda».

Si Will Ladislaw hubiera oído algunas de las cosas que se dijeron en Freshitt Hall aquella mañana, habría considerado confirmadas todas sus suposiciones sobre la disposición de ciertas personas a hablar con desprecio de la prolongación de su estancia en Middlemarch. Sir James, en efecto, aunque más tranquilo respecto a Dorothea, había procurado enterarse de los movimientos de Ladislaw, y en el señor Standish

contaba con un confidente muy bien preparado, que necesariamente estaba al tanto de sus preocupaciones en aquel asunto. El hecho de que Ladislaw siguiera en Middlemarch casi dos meses después de haber anunciado su marcha inmediata bastaba para exacerbar las sospechas de sir James o, por lo menos, para justificar su aversión a un «joven» que definía como superficial, veleidoso y propenso a la temeridad, lo que va de la mano con una situación en la vida carente del soporte de los lazos familiares o de una seria dedicación profesional. Además, acababa de oír algo de labios de Standish que, al mismo tiempo que justificaba todas aquellas suposiciones acerca de Will, le ofrecía el medio para librar de todo peligro a Dorothea.

Circunstancias inusitadas pueden lograr que todos nos comportemos de manera muy poco acorde con nuestra manera de ser: se dan situaciones en las que hasta la persona de apariencia más majestuosa se ve obligada a estornudar, y en las que nuestras emociones están sujetas a influencias igualmente incongruentes. El bueno de sir James era aquella mañana una persona tan distinta de sí mismo que no veía la hora de hablar con Dorothea sobre un asunto que de ordinario evitaba como si se tratara de una cuestión vergonzosa para los dos. No podía usar a Celia como intermediaria, porque no deseaba que su mujer estuviera al tanto del tipo de habladurías que tenía en la cabeza; y antes de que su cuñada se presentara sin previo aviso había estado tratando de imaginar cómo, con su timidez y su lengua poco avezada, podría siquiera abordar aquel tema de conversación. La inesperada presencia de Dorothea le convenció de su total impotencia para decir cosas desagradables; pero la desesperación le sugirió un medio; envió al mozo de cuadra, en caballo sin ensillar, con una nota escrita a lápiz para la señora Cadwallader, que ya estaba al tanto de aquellas habladurías y a quien no le importaría repetirlas tantas veces como hiciera falta.

A Dorothea se la retuvo con el excelente pretexto de que se esperaba, en el espacio de una hora, al señor Garth, a quien ella quería ver, y aún estaba hablando con Caleb en el paseo de grava cuando sir James, a la espera de la esposa del rector, la vio venir y la recibió haciéndole las necesarias sugerencias.

—¡Ni una palabra más! Entiendo —exclamó la señora Cadwallader—. Conserve usted la inocencia. Yo tengo el alma tan negra que no me puedo tiznar.

—No quiero decir que tenga importancia —protestó sir James, a quien no le gustaba que la señora Cadwallader entendiera demasiado—. Pero es deseable que Dorothea sepa que hay razones para que no vuelva a recibirlo; y yo no se lo puedo decir. Resultará mucho más fácil si viene de labios de usted.

Resultó muy fácil, efectivamente. Cuando Dorothea dijo adiós a Caleb y se volvió para acompañarlos, todo hacía pensar que la señora Cadwallader había atravesado el parque por simple casualidad, para hablar con Celia acerca del bebé o algo parecido. ¿De manera que el señor Brooke regresaba a casa? ¡Estupendo! Regresaba, cabía esperar, completamente curado de la fiebre parlamentaria y de su vocación de pionero. A propósito del *Pionero*… alguien había profetizado que sería muy pronto como una ballena varada, y se pondría de todos los colores por no saber cómo continuar, ya que el protegido del señor Brooke, el joven y brillante señor Ladislaw, se había marchado o estaba a punto de marcharse. ¿Sabía sir James algo de todo aquello?

Los tres iban andando lentamente por el camino de grava, y sir James, volviéndose para golpear con la fusta un matorral, dijo que había oído algo parecido.

—¡Todo falso! —dijo la señora Cadwallader—. Por lo que parece ni se ha ido ni está a punto de irse; el *Pionero* conserva su color, y el señor Orlando Ladislaw se halla envuelto en un triste escándalo liberal de lo más inconveniente, y se pasa el día gorjeando con la esposa de tu señor Lydgate, una joven que, según me dicen, es la cosa más bonita que pueda imaginarse. Parece que no hay nadie que al entrar en esa casa no encuentre a nuestro joven caballero tumbado en la alfombra o gorjeando junto al piano. Pero ya se sabe que los habitantes de las ciudades industriales son siempre muy poco recomendables.

—Ha empezado usted diciendo que era falsa la primera noticia, señora Cadwallader, y yo creo que esta otra también lo es —dijo Dorothea con indignada energía—; por lo menos, estoy segura de que se trata de una mala interpretación. No consentiré que se diga en mi presencia nada malo contra el señor Ladislaw; ya se han cometido demasiadas injusticias con él.

A Dorothea, cuando se emocionaba de verdad, le preocupaba muy poco lo que otras personas pudieran pensar de sus sentimientos; e incluso aunque hubiera sido capaz de reflexionar ante unas palabras injuriosas contra Will, habría considerado mezquino guardar silencio por temor a ser malentendida. Tenía el rostro encendido y le temblaban los labios.

Sir James, mirándola, se arrepintió de su estratagema, pero la señora Cadwallader, siempre a la altura de las circunstancias, extendió las manos con las palmas hacia afuera y dijo:

—¡Dios nos lo conceda, querida! Ojalá todas las cosas malas que se cuentan de alguien fuesen mentira. De todos modos es una lástima que Lydgate se haya casado con una de esas muchachas de Middlemarch.

Considerando que es de familia noble, podría haber conseguido una mujer con buena sangre en las venas, no demasiado joven, que aceptase su profesión. Ahí está Clara Harfager, por ejemplo, cuya familia no sabe qué hacer con ella; y tiene una dote. De esa forma hubiéramos podido tenerla entre nosotros. Pero ¡qué se le va a hacer! No sirve de nada ser prudente por otras personas. ¿Dónde está Celia? Entraremos en la casa, si no les parece mal.

—Yo me voy inmediatamente a Tipton Grange —dijo Dorothea, con bastante altivez—. Hasta la vista.

Sir James no encontró nada que decir mientras la acompañaba hasta el coche. Estaba descontento con el resultado de una estratagema que ya le había costado de antemano sentirse humillado en secreto.

Dorothea se puso en camino entre los setos cubiertos de bayas y los campos donde ya se había cosechado el maíz sin ver ni oír nada de lo que tenía a su alrededor. Las lágrimas le brotaron de los ojos y rodaron por las mejillas, pero tampoco se dio cuenta. El mundo, al parecer, se volvía feo y odioso, y no había sitio para la confianza. «Todos tratan de denigrarlo ante mí; pero no me importa sufrir si él no tiene la culpa. Siempre he creído que era bueno». Tales fueron sus últimos pensamientos antes de darse cuenta de que el coche pasaba bajo el arco junto a la casa de los guardas en Tipton Grange, momento en que se llevó precipitadamente el pañuelo a los ojos y empezó a pensar en sus encargos. El cochero pidió permiso para desenganchar los caballos por espacio de media hora porque una herradura no estaba bien; y Dorothea, con la sensación de que iba a descansar, se quitó los guantes y el sombrero mientras se apoyaba contra una estatua del vestíbulo y hablaba con el ama de llaves. Finalmente dijo:

—Tengo que quedarme aquí un rato, señora Kell. Pasaré a la biblioteca y si me abre usted las contraventanas le pondré por escrito algunas instrucciones que mi tío daba en su carta.

—Las contraventanas están abiertas, señora —dijo la señora Kell, siguiendo a Dorothea, que había echado a andar mientras hablaba—. El señor Ladislaw está aquí buscando algo.

(Will había vuelto a Tipton Grange para recoger una carpeta de bocetos que echó de menos en el momento de empaquetar sus pertenencias y de la que no deseaba desprenderse).

A Dorothea le dio un vuelco el corazón, pero no se detuvo de manera perceptible: a decir verdad, saber que Will estaba allí le parecía de momento tan oportuno como encontrar algo muy preciado que hubiera perdido. Cuando llegó a la puerta, le dijo a la señora Kell:

—Pase delante, y dígale que estoy aquí.

Will había encontrado la carpeta y la había colocado sobre una mesa para revisar los bocetos y darse la satisfacción de contemplar aquella memorable obra de arte cuya relación con la naturaleza había resultado demasiado misteriosa para Dorothea. Aún sonreía mientras ordenaba los apuntes, pensando que, al regresar a Middlemarch, quizá encontrara una carta suya esperándolo, cuando la señora Kell, muy cerca de él, dijo:

—La señora Casaubon acaba de llegar, señor.

Will se dio la vuelta muy deprisa, y un momento después Dorothea estaba ya en el cuarto. Se reunieron cuando la señora Kell cerraba la puerta tras sí; cada uno miraba al otro y la realidad del encuentro se veía desbordada por algo que suprimía las palabras. No fue la confusión lo que los mantuvo en silencio, porque ambos sentían que la separación estaba próxima y no hay timidez ante un triste adiós.

Dorothea se dirigió maquinalmente hacia la silla de su tío junto al escritorio, y Will, después de separársela un poco de la mesa, se alejó unos pasos, quedándose en pie frente a ella.

—Siéntese, por favor —dijo Dorothea, cruzando las manos sobre el regazo—; me alegro mucho de encontrarlo aquí.

A Will le pareció que su rostro tenía exactamente el mismo aspecto que la primera vez que le estrechó la mano en Roma; porque la toca de viuda, unida al sombrero, desapareció de su cabeza al quitarse este último, y Ladislaw vio también que había llorado hacía muy poco. Sin embargo, el componente de enfado en la agitación de Dorothea se había desvanecido al verlo; cuando se encontraban cara a cara estaba habituada a sentir la confianza y la alegre sensación de libertad que acompaña siempre el mutuo entendimiento, y ¿cómo podrían las palabras de otras personas impedirlo de repente? Dejemos que la música capaz de tomar posesión de nuestro cuerpo y de llenar el aire de alegría suene una vez más… ¿Qué importancia tiene que alguien le ponga reparos cuando está ausente?

—Hoy mismo he enviado una carta a Lowick Manor pidiéndole permiso para ir a verla —dijo Will, sentándose frente a ella—. Me marcho de inmediato y no podía irme sin hablar de nuevo con usted.

—Pensaba que nos habíamos despedido cuando vino usted a Lowick hace muchas semanas… También entonces creía usted que estaba a punto de marcharse —dijo Dorothea, temblándole un poco la voz.

—Sí; pero ignoraba cosas que ahora sé… cosas que han modificado mis sentimientos sobre el futuro. Cuando la vi la última vez, soñaba con que podría volver algún día. Ahora no creo que lo haga nunca. — Will guardó silencio un momento.

—¿Quiere explicarme sus razones? —dijo Dorothea, con timidez.

—Sí —respondió Will, impetuosamente, echando la cabeza hacia atrás, y apartando la vista con gesto irritado—. Por supuesto que sí. He sido groseramente insultado a los ojos de usted y de otras personas. Se han hecho suposiciones mezquinas que ponen en duda mi hombría de bien. Quiero que sepa que bajo ninguna circunstancia me hubiese rebajado mediante… bajo ninguna circunstancia hubiese dado a nadie la posibilidad de decir que iba en busca de dinero con el pretexto de buscar… algo distinto. No había necesidad de ninguna otra salvaguarda contra mí…, la del dinero era suficiente.

Will se levantó de la silla al decir la última palabra y se dirigió… apenas supo adónde; pero fue a la ventana salediza más cercana, que se hallaba abierta ahora, más o menos como en la misma época un año antes, cuando Dorothea y él estuvieron hablando allí de pie. Ella, por su parte, tenía en aquel momento el corazón lleno de comprensión hacia su cólera: solo deseaba convencerlo de que nunca había sido injusta con él, pero Will parecía haberse alejado como si también la considerase parte de un mundo hostil.

—Sería muy injusto por su parte suponer que yo le haya atribuido jamás mezquindad alguna —empezó. Luego, con su habitual manera apasionada, deseosa de convencerlo, dejó su asiento y se colocó frente a él en su antiguo sitio de la ventana, diciendo—: ¿Supone acaso que yo he desconfiado alguna vez de usted?

Cuando Will la vio allí, se sobresaltó y retrocedió, apartándose de la ventana, sin mirarla a los ojos. Dorothea se sintió herida por aquel movimiento que seguía a la anterior indignación en el tono de voz. Estaba dispuesta a explicarle que lo sucedido era tan duro para ella como para él; pero las extrañas circunstancias de su relación, circunstancias que ninguno de los dos podía mencionar de manera explícita, hacían que tuviese siempre miedo de decir demasiado. En aquel momento no creía que Will hubiera querido casarse con ella y temía usar expresiones que pudieran implicar tal creencia. Solo dijo con gran seriedad, recurriendo a las últimas palabras de su interlocutor:

—Estoy segura de que nunca ha sido necesaria ninguna salvaguarda contra usted.

Will no contestó. En la tempestuosa fluctuación de sus sentimientos, aquellas palabras le parecieron cruelmente neutrales y, pasada ya su explosión de cólera, lo que resaltaba en él era su palidez y su aire dolorido. Se llegó hasta la mesa y cerró la carpeta, mientras Dorothea lo contemplaba desde lejos. Estaban malgastando sus últimos momentos de intimidad en un silencio lastimoso. ¿Qué podía decir él, si la idea que predominaba obstinadamente en su cabeza era el amor apasionado que se había prohibido a sí mismo declarar? ¿Qué podía decir ella, incapacitada para ofrecerle su ayuda… obligada a conservar el dinero que debería haber sido suyo… y dado que Will no parecía responder como de costumbre a su total confianza y afecto?

Ladislaw abandonó finalmente la carpeta y se acercó de nuevo a la ventana.

—Tengo que irme —dijo, con esa mirada peculiar que acompaña a veces a la amargura en los sentimientos, como si los ojos estuviesen cansados e incluso quemados por haber contemplado una luz demasiado intensa.

—¿Qué hará usted en la vida? —preguntó Dorothea tímidamente—. ¿Sigue teniendo las mismas intenciones que cuando nos despedimos la última vez?

—Sí —respondió Will, en un tono que parecía descartar aquel tema por falto de interés—. Trabajaré con toda la intensidad posible en la primera cosa que se presente. Supongo que uno se acostumbra a vivir sin alegría ni esperanza.

—¡Qué palabras tan tristes! —dijo Dorothea con una peligrosa tendencia a sollozar. Luego, tratando de sonreír, añadió—: Usted y yo solíamos estar de acuerdo en que los dos exageramos un poco al hablar.

—Ahora no hay exageración en mis palabras —dijo Will, apoyándose contra un ángulo de la pared—. Hay ciertas cosas que un hombre solo experimenta una vez en la vida; y se da cuenta en un momento u otro que lo mejor ha pasado ya. Esa convicción me ha llegado siendo todavía muy joven… y eso es todo. Lo que me interesa más que ninguna otra cosa me está absolutamente prohibido… No me refiero solo a que esté fuera de mi alcance, sino que también me lo prohíben el orgullo y el honor… todo lo que hace que me respete a mí mismo. No hay duda de que seguiré viviendo como un hombre que ha visto el paraíso en un momento de éxtasis.

Will hizo una pausa, imaginando que a Dorothea le sería imposible no entender aquello; de hecho sintió que se contradecía y que ofendía su propia estimación hablándole con tanta claridad; de todas formas… no se podía decir en justicia que fuese cortejar a una mujer explicarle que nunca se le iba a hacer la corte. Es preciso admitir que se trataba de una forma muy extraña de cortejar.

Dorothea revisaba muy deprisa el pasado con una perspectiva completamente distinta de la de Will. Aunque la posibilidad de que fuera ella lo que le interesaba más que ninguna otra cosa hizo palpitar todo su ser por un instante, en seguida vino la duda: el recuerdo de sus escasas experiencias comunes palideció y se

encogió ante la idea de que las relaciones de Will con alguna otra persona que le hubiera acompañado constantemente podían haber sido mucho más ricas y satisfactorias. Todo lo que había dicho quizá se refiriera a aquella otra relación, y cualquier cosa que hubiera sucedido entre los dos quedaba plenamente explicada por lo que ella siempre había considerado como una simple amistad y por los crueles impedimentos que el injurioso acto de su marido había creado. Dorothea guardó silencio, con los ojos bajos en actitud soñadora, mientras se arremolinaban en su cabeza las imágenes que iban forjando la horrible certeza de que Will se estaba refiriendo a la señora Lydgate. Pero ¿por qué horrible? Ladislaw quería que Dorothea supiera que también en este caso su conducta se hallaba por encima de toda sospecha.

A Will no le sorprendió su silencio. También su mente se agitaba tumultuosamente mientras la contemplaba, y sentía de una manera bastante descabellada que tenía que suceder algo que impidiese su separación… algún milagro, algo que no dependiera, desde luego, de las palabras que pronunciasen de manera voluntaria. Sin embargo, después de todo, ¿acaso compartía ella sus sentimientos? No le era posible fingir que prefería creerla libre de sufrimiento en aquel punto. No podía negarse a sí mismo que el secreto anhelo de saber que ella lo amaba estaba en la raíz de toda sus palabras.

Ninguno de los dos se dio cuenta del tiempo que estuvieron así. Dorothea había levantado los ojos y se disponía a hablar cuando se abrió la puerta y entró su lacayo para decir:

—Los caballos están listos, señora; podemos irnos cuando quiera.

—En seguida —dijo Dorothea. Luego, volviéndose hacia Will, añadió—: Tengo que escribir unas instrucciones para el ama de llaves.

—Yo debo irme —dijo Will, cuando la puerta se cerró de nuevo, avanzando hacia ella—. Pasado mañana dejo Middlemarch.

—Ha obrado usted bien en todo —dijo Dorothea en voz baja, sintiendo un peso en el corazón que le hacía difícil hablar.

Le ofreció la mano, y Will la cogió un instante sin decir nada, porque sus palabras le habían parecido cruelmente frías y como pronunciadas por otra persona. Sus ojos se encontraron, pero en los de él había descontento y en los de ella tan solo tristeza. Will se dio la vuelta y se puso la carpeta bajo el brazo.

—Nunca he sido injusta con usted. Acuérdese de mí, por favor —dijo Dorothea, conteniendo un sollozo que estuvo a punto de escapársele.

—¿Por qué dice eso? —respondió Will, molesto—. Como si no corriera más bien el peligro de olvidarme de todo lo demás.

Tuvo realmente un movimiento de enfado contra ella en aquel instante, lo que le impulsó a marcharse sin hacer la menor pausa. Todo fue como un relámpago para Dorothea: sus últimas palabras… su distante inclinación de cabeza al llegar a la puerta… la sensación de que se había marchado para siempre. Se dejó caer en la silla y por unos momentos permaneció inmóvil como una estatua, mientras imágenes y emociones pasaban atropelladamente por su cabeza. Primero surgió la alegría, a pesar de las amenazadoras consecuencias que la seguían… alegría ante el convencimiento de que la amaba a ella y de que era a ella a quien estaba renunciando; que no había realmente otro amor menos permisible, más culpable, del que el honor le obligara a alejarse a toda prisa. Se habían separado de todas formas, pero… Dorothea respiró hondo y sintió que recuperaba las fuerzas… podía pensar en él sin restricciones de ninguna clase. En aquel momento la separación era fácil de soportar: la primera seguridad de amar y de ser amado excluye el dolor. Era como si una presión helada y rígida se hubiera disuelto y su conciencia tuviera sitio para moverse: su pasado volvió a ella dotado de una interpretación mucho más amplia. La alegría no era menor —quizá era más completa precisamente en aquel momento— a causa de la despedida irrevocable; porque no cabían los reproches, porque no había que imaginar un gesto de despreciativa sorpresa ni en los ojos ni en los labios de nadie. La forma de actuar de Will acallaba todos los reproches y transformaba la sorpresa en respeto.

Cualquiera que la estuviese observando habría advertido la presencia de una idea fortalecedora. De la misma manera que, cuando la capacidad inventiva está trabajando con satisfactoria facilidad, cualquier pequeña demanda hecha a la atención se atiende sin reservas como si fuera tan solo una rendija abierta a la luz del sol, a Dorothea no le costó ya ningún esfuerzo redactar sus instrucciones. Intercambió unas últimas palabras con el ama de llaves en tono alegre, y cuando se sentó en el coche, le brillaban los ojos y las mejillas se mostraron llenas de frescura bajo el lúgubre sombrero. Echó hacia atrás las pesadas gasas que marcaban el luto y miró hacia adelante, preguntándose qué camino habría tomado Will. Correspondía a su manera de ser sentirse orgullosa de que fuera intachable y a través de todos sus sentimientos corría la misma melodía: «Estaba en lo cierto al defenderlo».

El cochero tenía por costumbre llevar sus caballos tordos a buen paso, ya que, como el señor Casaubon detestaba cualquier cosa que lo apartase de su escritorio, todo le impacientaba, y siempre deseaba llegar

cuanto antes al final de los viajes; de manera que ahora Dorothea avanzaba con gran celeridad. El paseo era agradable, porque la lluvia nocturna había limpiado la atmósfera de polvo, y el cielo azul parecía muy lejano, a mucha distancia de la región de las grandes nubes que navegaban muy cerca unas de otras. La tierra parecía un sitio feliz bajo el vasto cielo y Dorothea deseaba alcanzar a Will para verlo una vez más.

Al doblar el recodo en la carretera apareció ante ella con la carpeta bajo el brazo; pero al cabo de un momento ya lo había adelantado mientras él se quitaba el sombrero, y Dorothea sintió una punzada al saberse sentada allí en una especie de exaltación, dejándolo a él atrás. No podía volverse a mirarlo. Era como si una multitud de objetos indiferentes los hubiera separado por completo, obligándolos a caminar por senderos distintos, alejándolos cada vez más el uno del otro y haciendo inútil mirar atrás. A Dorothea le resultaba tan imposible recurrir a cualquier signo que pareciera decir: «¿Es necesario que nos separemos?» como detener el coche para esperarlo. Más aún, ¡qué mundo de razones se alzaban en su interior contra cualquier movimiento de su imaginación hacia un futuro que pudiera revocar la decisión de aquel día!

«Ojalá lo hubiese sabido antes… Ojalá él lo supiera… que podemos ser felices pensando cada uno en el otro, aunque nos hayamos separado para siempre. Y ¡si hubiera podido darle dinero y facilitarle las cosas!». Tales eran los anhelos que se repetía con más insistencia. Y, sin embargo, tanto pesaba el mundo sobre ella a pesar de la independencia que le daba su energía, que, junto a la idea de Will necesitado de ayuda y en posición desventajosa ante el mundo, surgía siempre la visión de lo indecoroso de una relación más íntima entre los dos, actitud que respondía a la opinión de todas las personas ligadas a ella. Dorothea comprendía plenamente la fuerza de los motivos que determinaban la conducta de Will. ¿Cómo podía soñar él con que ella desafiara la barrera que su marido había colocado entre los dos? ¿Cómo podía ella decirse nunca a sí misma que la desafiaría?

Las certezas de Will, mientras el coche disminuía de tamaño con la distancia, estaban teñidas de una amargura mucho mayor. Pequeñeces insignificantes bastaban para molestarle en su presente estado de ánimo, ponía su sensibilidad a flor de piel, y la imagen de Dorothea adelantándolo con su coche mientras él caminaba cansinamente, como un pobre diablo deseoso de situarse en un mundo que, de acuerdo con su estado de ánimo, le ofrecía muy pocas cosas apetecibles, hacía que su conducta pareciese una simple cuestión de necesidad, privándolo del apoyo que dan las resoluciones libremente adoptadas. Después de todo, no tenía seguridad de que ella le amase: ¿es que algún hombre podía fingir en ese caso alegrarse de que todo el sufrimiento cayera de su parte?

Will pasó aquella velada con los Lydgate; a la noche siguiente ya se había marchado.

Libro séptimo

Dos tentaciones

Capítulo LXIII

Estas cosas insignificantes son grandes para el hombre pequeño.

GOLDSMITH

—¿Ve usted mucho en estos últimos tiempos a Lydgate, ese fénix científico suyo? —preguntó el señor Toller al señor Farebrother, sentado a su derecha, durante una de las cenas que daba por Navidades.

—No mucho, siento tener que decirlo —respondió el vicario, acostumbrado a replicar hábilmente a las bromas del señor Toller sobre su fe en las nuevas luces de la medicina—. Vivo en un sitio apartado y Lydgate está muy ocupado.

—¿Es eso cierto? Me alegra saberlo —dijo el doctor Minchin, con mezcla de afabilidad y de sorpresa.

—Dedica mucho tiempo al hospital nuevo —explicó el señor Farebrother, que tenía sus razones para continuar con aquel tema—: eso lo sé por mi vecina, la señora Casaubon, que va allí con frecuencia. Me dice que Lydgate es infatigable y que está haciendo grandes cosas con la institución de Bulstrode. Ahora prepara un nuevo pabellón en previsión de que el cólera llegue hasta nosotros.

—Y también prepara nuevos tratamientos para ensayarlos con los pacientes, imagino —dijo el señor Toller.

—Vamos, Toller, sea sincero —dijo el señor Farebrother—. Es usted demasiado inteligente para no ver los aspectos positivos de ideas nuevas y audaces en medicina, como en todas las demás cosas; y en cuanto al cólera, me atrevo a suponer, ninguno de ustedes está muy seguro de qué es lo que deberían hacer. Si un hombre avanza un poco más de la cuenta por un camino nuevo, normalmente se perjudica más a sí mismo que a los demás.

—Estoy seguro de que usted y Wrench deberían estarle agradecidos —dijo el doctor Minchin, mirando a Toller—, porque les ha mandado a los mejores pacientes de Peacock.

—Lydgate ha estado viviendo muy a lo grande para no ser más que un principiante —dijo el señor Harry Toller, el fabricante de cerveza—. Supongo que lo apoyan sus familiares del norte.

—Así lo espero —dijo el señor Chichely—; de lo contrario no debería haberse casado con esa encantadora muchacha a la que todos queremos tanto. ¡Caramba! Siempre se tiene envidia del hombre que se lleva a la chica más bonita de la ciudad.

—¡Muy cierto, a fe mía! Y la mejor también —dijo el señor Standish.

—A mi amigo Vincy no le gustó mucho ese matrimonio, eso lo sé a ciencia cierta —dijo el señor Chichely—. Él, desde luego, no los ayudará mucho. En cuanto a lo que haga la familia de la otra parte, no estoy en condiciones de saberlo. —Había una marcada reserva en su manera de hablar.

—Nunca se me hubiera ocurrido que Lydgate contara con su clientela para vivir —dijo el señor Toller con un leve toque de sarcasmo; y al llegar a aquel punto se abandonó el tema.

No era la primera vez que el señor Farebrother oía insinuaciones de que los gastos de Lydgate eran demasiado elevados para cubrirlos con sus ingresos profesionales, pero no consideró improbable la existencia de recursos o expectativas que excusaran las cuantiosas sumas invertidas con motivo de la boda y que evitaran las consecuencias desfavorables de una reducida clientela. Una noche, cuando se tomó la molestia de ir a Middlemarch para charlar con Lydgate como en los viejos tiempos, advirtió en él un aire de tensión muy distinto a su habitual tranquilidad a la hora de guardar silencio o de romperlo con brusca energía siempre que tenía algo que decir. Mientras estuvieron en su cuarto de trabajo, Lydgate habló largo

y tendido, utilizando argumentos a favor y en contra de determinadas hipótesis biológicas; pero no le mostró ni habló de ninguna de esas cosas concretas que constituyen los sucesivos mojones de una investigación paciente e ininterrumpida, mojones que él mismo consideraba imprescindibles, diciendo que «ha de haber sístole y diástole en toda investigación» y que «el entendimiento de un hombre debe estar continuamente expandiéndose y contrayéndose entre todo el horizonte humano y el horizonte del objetivo de un microscopio». Aquella noche Lydgate parecía hablar en gran parte sin otro motivo que evitar cualquier referencia personal; y al poco rato pasaron al salón, donde el joven médico, después de pedir a Rosamond que tocara para ellos, se hundió en su sillón sin decir palabra, pero con una extraña luz en los ojos. «Quizá haya estado tomando algún opiato», fue una idea que cruzó por la cabeza de Farebrother. «Neuralgia facial quizá… o preocupaciones médicas».

No se le ocurrió que el matrimonio de Lydgate no marchase bien: creía, como todo el mundo, que Rosamond era una criatura amable y dócil, aunque él nunca la hubiera encontrado interesante; demasiado parecida al modelo perfecto que produce un colegio privado para señoritas; y la madre del señor Farebrother no podía perdonar a Rosamond que siempre diera la impresión de no ver a Henrietta Noble cuando estaban en el mismo cuarto. «De todas formas, Lydgate se enamoró de ella —se dijo el vicario—, y debe responder a sus gustos».

Aunque el señor Farebrother se daba cuenta de que su amigo era un hombre orgulloso, como apenas poseía características similares y quizá le preocupaba muy poco la dignidad personal, excepto la dignidad de no ser mezquino ni estúpido, difícilmente podía entender la manera en que Lydgate rehuía, como si le quemara, cualquier confidencia sobre su vida privada. Y, poco después de la conversación en casa del señor Toller, el vicario se enteró de algo que le hizo buscar aún con más afán alguna oportunidad para hacer saber a Lydgate de forma indirecta que, si quería confiar a alguien sus dificultades, contaba con un oído amigo dispuesto a escucharlo.

La oportunidad se presentó en casa del señor Vincy, donde, el día de Año Nuevo, se celebró una fiesta, a la que el señor Farebrother fue invitado sin posibilidad de resistencia, con el pretexto de que no podía abandonar a sus viejos amigos al iniciar una nueva etapa de su vida como hombre importante y como rector además de vicario. Y aquella fiesta resultó extraordinariamente simpática: todas las damas de la familia Farebrother estuvieron presentes; todos los hijos de los Vincy cenaron en la mesa con los mayores, y Fred convenció a su madre de que si no invitaba a Mary Garth los Farebrother lo considerarían un desaire, porque Mary era su amiga íntima. Mary asistió a la fiesta y Fred estuvo de muy buen humor, aunque con altibajos, porque la satisfacción de que su madre reparara en la importancia que los protagonistas de la fiesta concedían a Mary se vio muy mezclada con los celos cuando vio que el señor Farebrother se sentaba a su lado. Fred había tenido más confianza en sus propios méritos antes de que empezase a temer que el vicario «lo desplazase», miedo que aún seguía atenazándolo. La señora Vincy, en su máximo esplendor matronil, contemplaba la figura más bien exigua de Mary, su pelo áspero y rizado y su rostro tan desprovisto de lirios y rosas y se maravillaba; luego trataba sin éxito de imaginarse interesada por el aspecto de Mary vestida de novia, o de sentirse complacida con unos nietos que reprodujeran las facciones de los Garth. La fiesta, sin embargo, fue muy alegre y Mary estuvo particularmente brillante; contenta, pensando en Fred, de que su familia se mostrara más cariñosa con ella y también dispuesta a que vieran lo mucho que la apreciaban otras personas de reconocida capacidad para juzgar con acierto.

El señor Farebrother advirtió que Lydgate parecía aburrido y que el señor Vincy hablaba lo menos posible con su yerno. Rosamond se mostró encantadora y muy segura de sí misma. Tan solo una observación minuciosa, algo que el vicario no había tenido aún motivos para dedicarle, habría permitido advertir la total ausencia de ese interés por la presencia del marido que una mujer amante revela de manera inevitable, incluso aunque el protocolo la mantenga alejada de él. Cuando Lydgate tomaba parte en la conversación, Rosamond jamás lo miraba, exactamente como si fuera la escultura de una Psique[136] modelada para dirigir la vista hacia el otro lado; y cuando, después de haber salido por espacio de una hora o dos, el joven médico regresó a la habitación, Rosamond pareció no darse cuenta de un hecho que dieciocho meses antes hubiera conseguido el mismo efecto que un numeral delante de una sucesión de ceros. En realidad tenía muy presentes la voz y los movimientos de Lydgate, y la manera encantadora y risueña con que los desdeñaba era un castigo deliberado para manifestar el profundo desacuerdo que la separaba de su marido sin comprometer por ello el decoro. Cuando las damas pasaron al salón, después de que Lydgate hubiera tenido que salir abandonando el postre, la señora Farebrother, al ver cerca a Rosamond, le dijo:

—Veo que tiene usted que renunciar en muchos casos a la compañía de su marido, señora Lydgate.

—Sí, la vida de un médico es muy sacrificada; especialmente cuando uno está tan consagrado a su

profesión como el señor Lydgate —respondió Rosamond, que se encontraba de pie y pudo alejarse sin dificultad al final de aquel pequeño parlamento tan correcto.

—La vida le resulta muy monótona cuando no tiene invitados —dijo la señora Vincy, sentada junto a la anciana—. Me convencí de ello cuando Rosamond enfermó y fui a cuidarla. Compréndalo, señora Farebrother: la nuestra es una casa muy alegre. Yo misma tengo un carácter muy animado, y mi marido es una persona extraordinariamente sociable. Y Rosamond está acostumbrada a eso. A algo muy distinto, creo yo, de un marido que sale a las horas más extrañas, que nunca se sabe cuándo volverá a casa, y que tiene una manera de ser reservada y orgullosa. —La indiscreta señora Vincy bajó levemente el tono de voz en aquel paréntesis—. Pero mi hija siempre ha tenido un carácter angelical; sus hermanos hacían con frecuencia cosas que le desagradaban, pero ella nunca se ponía de mal humor; desde muy pequeña siempre ha sido mejor que nadie y ha tenido un cutis incomparable. Aunque la verdad es que todos mis hijos tienen buen carácter, gracias a Dios.

Aquello último era sin duda fácil de creer para cualquiera que mirase a la señora Vincy mientras se echaba hacia atrás las anchas cintas de la toca y sonreía a sus tres hijas menores, de edades comprendidas entre los siete y los once años. Si bien en aquella mirada sonriente tuvo que incluir a Mary Garth, a quien las tres niñas habían llevado hasta un rincón para obligarla a contarles cuentos. Mary estaba terminando precisamente la deliciosa historia de Rumpelstiltskin, que se sabía de cabo a rabo, porque formaba parte de un volumen de pastas rojas, libro favorito de Letty, siempre dispuesta a instruir con sus cuentos a sus ignorantes mayores. Louisa, el ojo derecho de la señora Vincy, corrió en seguida hasta ella llena de una profunda agitación que le hacía abrir mucho los ojos y dijo:

—¡Mamá, mamá, el hombrecillo dio una patada tan fuerte en el suelo que luego no podía sacar la pierna!

—¡Que Dios te bendiga, ángel mío! —respondió su madre—; mañana me lo contarás todo. ¡Ahora ve y escucha! —Y luego, siguiendo a Louisa con la mirada mientras volvía al atractivo rincón, la señora Vincy pensó que si Fred quería que volviese a invitar a Mary no pondría objeciones, teniendo en cuenta lo bien que los niños lo pasaban con ella.

Aquel rincón se animó aún más en seguida, porque se incorporó al grupo el señor Farebrother y, sentándose detrás de Louisa, hizo que la niña se colocara sobre sus rodillas, por lo que las hermanas insistieron en que el recién llegado oyera la historia de Rumpelstiltskin y en que Mary la contara de nuevo. El vicario insistió también y Mary, sin protestas, empezó otra vez, con su precisión habitual, utilizando exactamente las mismas palabras que antes. Fred, que también se había sentado cerca del grupo, habría sentido una satisfacción sin límites ante el éxito de Mary si el señor Farebrother no la hubiera estado mirando con evidente admiración, mientras, para complacer a las niñas, manifestaba con gestos su gran interés por el cuento.

—Ya nunca volverá a gustarte mi gigante con un solo ojo, Loo —dijo Fred al final.

—Sí, claro que sí. Háblanos ahora de él —dijo Louisa.

—No me atrevo; no estoy preparado. Pregúntale al señor Farebrother.

—Sí —intervino Mary—; pídele al señor Farebrother que te hable de las hormigas que se quedaron sin su hermosa casa porque se la derribó un gigante llamado Tom, que creyó que no les importaba porque no las oía llorar ni les veía usar el pañuelo.

—Por favor —dijo Louisa, alzando los ojos al vicario.

—No, no, yo ya soy un viejo rector, demasiado serio. Si trato de sacar un cuento de mi bolsa, lo que sale es un sermón. ¿Quieres que te predique un sermón? —dijo el señor Farebrother, poniéndose las gafas de leer y frunciendo los labios.

—Sí —dijo Louisa, titubeando.

—Veamos; predicaré contra los bollos: cómo los bollos son una cosa muy mala, especialmente si son dulces y tienen además ciruelas pasas.

Louisa se lo tomó bastante en serio y, abandonando las rodillas del vicario, se fue con su hermano Fred.

—Ah; ya veo que no se puede predicar el día de Año Nuevo —dijo el señor Farebrother, levantándose y marchándose. Últimamente había descubierto los celos de Fred y también que él no estaba en camino de cambiar de preferencias.

—La señorita Garth es una joven encantadora —dijo la señora Farebrother, que había seguido con los ojos los movimientos de su hijo.

—Sí —dijo la señora Vincy, obligada a responder, porque la anciana señora se volvió hacia ella a la espera de sus palabras—. Es una lástima que no sea mejor parecida.

—Yo no diría eso —contestó la señora Farebrother con tono decidido—. Me gusta su expresión. No

siempre debemos pedir belleza cuando la bondad divina ha considerado oportuno crear sin ella a una joven tan admirable. Yo sitúo la buena educación por encima de todo, y la señorita Garth sabría cómo comportarse en cualquier posición social.

La anciana utilizó un tono de voz algo cortante, porque no perdía de vista la posibilidad de que Mary se convirtiera en su nuera; y es que la posición de Mary con respecto a Fred tenía la desventaja de que no era conveniente hacerla pública y de ahí que las tres señoras de la rectoría aún tuvieran esperanzas de que Camden escogiera a la señorita Garth.

Entraron nuevos visitantes y el salón se consagró a la música y a los juegos, mientras se preparaban las mesas del *whist* en la tranquila habitación al otro lado del vestíbulo. El señor Farebrother jugó una partida para complacer a su madre, que también jugaba al *whist* de vez en cuando para protestar contra el escándalo farisaico y el cambio en las costumbres, con lo que, desde ese punto de vista, hasta un renuncio tenía su dignidad. A la larga el vicario consiguió que el señor Chichely lo sustituyera y abandonó la habitación. En el momento en que cruzaba el vestíbulo se encontró con Lydgate, que acababa de regresar y se estaba quitando el abrigo.

—Es usted la persona que buscaba —dijo el señor Farebrother; y en lugar de entrar en el salón, echaron a andar por el vestíbulo y se detuvieron junto a la chimenea, donde el aire frío contribuía a que el fuego fuese más vivo—. Como ve, ahora que ya no juego por dinero, abandono la mesa del *whist* sin mayores dificultades —prosiguió, sonriendo a Lydgate—. Eso se lo debo a usted, según dice la señora Casaubon.

—¿Cómo es eso? —replicó Lydgate con frialdad.

—Ah, no quería que lo supiera; a eso lo llamo yo discreción poco generosa. Debería permitir a otras personas el placer de saber que les ha hecho usted un favor. No comparto la repugnancia de otros ante las deudas de gratitud: le aseguro que prefiero estar en deuda con todo el mundo por portarse bien conmigo.

—No sé a qué se refiere, como no se trate de que una vez le hablé de usted a la señora Casaubon. Pero no creí que ella faltara a la promesa de no mencionarlo —dijo Lydgate, apoyando la espalda contra la esquina de la repisa de la chimenea y sin mostrar la menor animación en el rostro.

—Fue a Brooke a quien se le escapó, hace muy pocos días. Me hizo el cumplido de afirmar que se alegraba mucho de que fuese para mí el beneficio, aunque usted le había estropeado sus maniobras estratégicas, comparándome con un Ken y un Tillotson[137] y otras cosas por el estilo, hasta que la señora Casaubon no quiso oír hablar de nadie más.

—Brooke no es más que un bobo parlanchín —dijo Lydgate despreciativamente.

—En este caso me alegré de que se fuera de la lengua. No veo por qué no quería usted que lo supiera, amigo mío. Y no hay la menor duda de que me ha hecho un gran favor. Es un buen freno para la vanidad descubrir hasta qué punto nuestras buenas acciones dependen de que no andemos escasos de dinero. Nadie tendría tentaciones de decir el Padre Nuestro al revés para complacer al diablo si no necesitara de sus servicios. Ahora ya no me hace falta estar pendiente de que me sonría la fortuna.

—No creo que nadie gane dinero sin intervención de la suerte —dijo Lydgate—; si un hombre se enriquece con su profesión, lo más seguro es que sea por casualidad.

El señor Farebrother pensó que la explicación de aquellas palabras, tan en contraste con las antiguas ideas de Lydgate, estaba en el cinismo que con frecuencia nace de la melancolía de un hombre a quien asedian los problemas. Al contestar, lo hizo en tono risueñamente filosófico:

—Hay que tener gran paciencia con las actitudes caprichosas del mundo. Pero resulta mucho más fácil esperar con paciencia cuando se tienen amigos que nos quieren y que solo piden ayudarnos a salir adelante en todo aquello que esté en su mano.

—Sí, claro —dijo Lydgate, con tono despreocupado, cambiando de actitud y mirando el reloj—. La gente tiende a exagerar sus dificultades.

Advirtió con toda claridad que el señor Farebrother le hacía un ofrecimiento de ayuda y su reacción fue de rechazo. Tan extrañas son las limitaciones de los seres humanos que, después de sentir durante mucho tiempo la satisfacción de haber hecho un favor al vicario, la insinuación de que el señor Farebrother estaba dispuesto a devolvérselo bastó para que Lydgate se encastillara en su silencio. Además, después de cualquier ofrecimiento de aquel tipo, ¿qué otra cosa vendría? Tener que «explicar su caso» implicaba admitir unas necesidades concretas. Hasta el suicidio le pareció más factible.

El señor Farebrother era un hombre demasiado agudo para no advertir el significado de aquella respuesta, y cierta rigidez en los modales y en el tono de voz de Lydgate, muy en correspondencia con su físico, permitía concluir que, si rechazaba de antemano los ofrecimientos que se le hacían, cualquier estratagema persuasiva quedaría por completo fuera de lugar.

—¿Qué hora tiene usted? —dijo el vicario, ocultando sus sentimientos heridos.

—Son más de las once —dijo Lydgate. Y los dos se dirigieron hacia el salón.

Capítulo LXIV

PRIMER CABALLERO: Sobre quien descansa el poder, ha de recaer también la culpa.
SEGUNDO CABALLERO: No, el poder es relativo; no se puede detener con plazas fuertes en la frontera a la peste que se acerca, ni pescar una carpa con argumentos sutiles. Toda fuerza son dos en una: la causa no es causa a no ser que esté presente el efecto; y la misma acción ha de contener necesariamente una parte de pasividad. Así la autoridad solo existe con la obediencia.

Aunque Lydgate se hubiera inclinado a exponer con total sinceridad su situación, sabía que el señor Farebrother difícilmente habría podido proporcionarle la ayuda que necesitaba de inmediato. Frente a las facturas anuales que le empezaban a llegar de sus proveedores, la amenaza de Dover que pesaba sobre el mobiliario, y sin otra fuente de ingresos que los pagos con cuentagotas de pacientes a quienes no se podía ofender —porque los excelentes honorarios recibidos de Freshitt Hall y Lowick Manor se consumieron inmediatamente—, tan solo una cantidad no inferior a las mil libras habría bastado para sacarlo de sus dificultades del momento, dejándole al mismo tiempo un remanente que, de acuerdo con la frase esperanzadora, de rigor en tales circunstancias, le habría dado «tiempo para situarse mejor».

Como es lógico, la alegre Navidad, al traer consigo el feliz Año Nuevo, momento en que los proveedores esperan que se les paguen los servicios y mercancías que, con una sonrisa en los labios, han suministrado a sus vecinos, aumentó hasta tal punto la presión de una serie de preocupaciones sórdidas que a Lydgate apenas le resultaba posible pensar sin interrupciones en otras cosas, incluso las más habituales y absorbentes. El joven médico no era un hombre malhumorado; su actividad intelectual, la bondad ardiente de su corazón, así como su recia contextura física, lo habrían conservado, en circunstancias normales, por encima de las mezquinas susceptibilidades incontroladas que determinan el mal carácter. Pero Lydgate era presa ya del peor tipo de irritación, que no surge simplemente de molestias repetidas, sino de un segundo descubrimiento por debajo de esas molestias; se había dado cuenta de que malgastaba sus energías y de que vivía angustiado por preocupaciones mezquinas, exactamente lo contrario de su intención original. «Esto es lo que estoy pensando; y eso es lo que podría haber estado pensando» era el amargo murmullo que se repetía en su interior, convirtiendo cualquier dificultad en doble aguijón para la impaciencia.

Algunos caballeros han conseguido hacer una figura sorprendente en el mundo literario al presentar el descontento general con el universo como una trampa de monotonía en la que su alma, dotada de grandeza, ha caído por error; pero el sentimiento de un yo maravilloso y de un mundo insignificante puede tener sus consuelos. El descontento de Lydgate, en cambio, era mucho más difícil de soportar por estar ligado al convencimiento de que, pese a tener a su alcance una gran existencia dedicada al pensamiento y a la acción eficaz, su personalidad se asfixiaba poco a poco en el miserable aislamiento de unos miedos egoístas y en la ansiedad vulgar por unos hechos que pudieran apaciguar tales miedos. Sus dificultades quizá parezcan terriblemente sórdidas e indignas de la atención de personas encumbradas que no saben nada de deudas excepto a gran escala. Sin duda alguna, las dificultades de Lydgate eran sórdidas; y para la mayoría de los seres humanos, que no son personas excelsas, no existe otra manera de escapar a la sordidez que verse libre del ansia de dinero, con todas sus esperanzas y tentaciones rastreras, con su aguardar a que mueran otros, con sus peticiones tan solo insinuadas, con sus deseos de mercachifle de hacer pasar lo malo por bueno, con su búsqueda de puestos que deberían ser para otros y con su frecuente anhelo de que llegue la suerte en forma de gran calamidad.

Precisamente porque a Lydgate le repugnaba la idea de poner el cuello bajo tan odioso yugo, su estado

de ánimo lo inclinaba cada vez más a la amargura y a la melancolía, con lo que su distanciamiento de Rosamond era cada vez mayor. Después de la primera noticia sobre el posible embargo de los muebles, Lydgate había hecho repetidos esfuerzos para lograr la colaboración de su mujer en la reducción de gastos y, ante la proximidad amenazadora de las Navidades, sus propuestas se habían ido haciendo cada vez más precisas. «Nosotros dos podemos vivir con una sola criada y mantenernos con muy poco —le dijo a Rosamond—, y yo puedo arreglármelas con un caballo». Porque Lydgate, como hemos visto, había empezado a razonar, con visión más clara, acerca de los gastos ordinarios, y la parte de orgullo que respondía en su manera de ser a las puras apariencias era insignificante comparada con el amor propio que le impulsaba a rebelarse ante la idea de aparecer como deudor moroso o de tener que pedir un préstamo.

—Claro que puedes despedir a los otros dos criados, si lo deseas —dijo Rosamond—; pero siempre me parecerá perjudicial para tu carrera vivir más pobremente. Eso hará que tengas una clientela inferior.

—No es un problema de elegir, cariño. Hemos empezado gastando demasiado. Peacock, no sé si te das cuenta, vivía en una casa mucho más pequeña que esta. Es culpa mía: tendría que haberme enterado mejor, y me merezco una paliza (si hubiera alguien con derecho a dármela) por ponerte en la tesitura de vivir a un nivel inferior al que siempre has conocido. Pero nos casamos porque nos queríamos, supongo. Y eso quizá nos ayude a seguir adelante hasta que mejoren las cosas. Vamos, cariño, deja eso que estás haciendo y ven aquí.

Lydgate se sentía en aquel momento terriblemente desalentado con su mujer, pero temía un futuro sin afecto y estaba decidido a evitar con todas sus fuerzas la ruptura. Rosamond le obedeció y el joven médico la sentó sobre sus rodillas, pero en lo más hondo de su corazón ella se había alejado por completo de su marido. La pobrecilla veía tan solo que el mundo no funcionaba de acuerdo con sus deseos y que Lydgate formaba parte de ese mundo. Él, sin embargo, le pasó un brazo alrededor de la cintura y puso la otra mano encima de las suyas; porque aquel hombre más bien brusco desplegaba mucha ternura en su trato con las mujeres, dando la impresión de que nunca olvidaba la fragilidad de su organismo y el delicado equilibrio de su salud tanto corporal como mental. Y de nuevo empezó a hablar con tono persuasivo.

—Descubro, ahora que miro las cosas con más atención, Rosy, que es increíble la cantidad de dinero que se nos escurre entre los dedos en el mantenimiento de la casa. Supongo que los criados no tienen cuidado y que recibimos a muchísimos invitados. Pero debe de haber muchas personas de nuestro mismo nivel que se las arreglan con bastante menos: quizá usan cosas más corrientes, imagino, y aprovechan incluso las sobras. Y parece que el dinero tiene una importancia muy relativa en estas cuestiones, porque la casa de Wrench es muy modesta y su clientela, sin embargo, de las más importantes.

—¡No pensarás en ser como los Wrench! —dijo Rosamond, girando levemente el cuello—. Yo misma te he oído hablar con repugnancia de esa forma de vivir.

—Sí, tienen un gusto pésimo en todo… logran que el ahorro resulte una cosa muy desagradable. Pero no es necesario que nosotros hagamos lo mismo. Solo quería decir que ellos evitan muchos gastos, aunque la clientela de Wrench sea de las más importantes.

—¿Por qué no has de conseguir tú una buena clientela, Tertius? El señor Peacock la tenía. Deberías ir con más cuidado para no ofender a la gente y recetar tus propias medicinas como hacen los demás. Estoy segura de que empezaste bien y de que tenías varias familias muy buenas. Ser excéntrico nunca da buenos resultados y deberías pensar más en lo que le gusta a todo el mundo —dijo Rosamond, con un tono de voz muy suave pero decididamente admonitorio.

Lydgate sintió crecer su indignación: estaba dispuesto a mostrarse indulgente con la debilidad femenina, pero no con sus órdenes arbitrarias. La superficialidad del alma de una ondina pierde su encanto cuando se vuelve didáctica. Pero logró controlarse y dijo únicamente, con un toque de despótica firmeza:

—Lo que tengo que hacer en mi profesión, Rosy, soy yo quien ha de decidirlo. No es ese el problema con que hemos de enfrentarnos. Basta con que sepas que nuestros ingresos van a ser muy escasos… difícilmente llegarán a las cuatrocientas libras, quizá menos, durante una larga temporada, y que hemos de intentar reorganizar nuestra vida de acuerdo con ello.

Rosamond guardó silencio durante unos momentos, mirando delante de sí, y luego dijo:

—Mi tío Nicholas debería darte un sueldo por el tiempo que dedicas al hospital; no es justo que trabajes de balde.

—Quedó entendido desde el primer momento que mis servicios serían gratuitos. Tampoco eso tiene por qué entrar en nuestras discusiones. Ya he indicado cuál es la única posibilidad —dijo Lydgate, con impaciencia. Luego, dominándose, continuó con más calma—: Creo que se me ha ocurrido una manera de que podamos vernos libres de buena parte de nuestras dificultades actuales. He sabido que Ned Plymdale se va a casar con la señorita Sophy Toller. Son ricos y en Middlemarch no es frecuente encontrar desocupada

una buena casa. Estoy seguro de que se quedarían de buen grado con la nuestra y con la mayor parte de nuestros muebles y de que pagarían un excelente alquiler. Voy a encargar a Trumbull que hable con Plymdale.

Rosamond abandonó las rodillas de su marido y se dirigió lentamente al otro extremo de la habitación; cuando se dio la vuelta para mirarlo de nuevo era evidente que las lágrimas habían hecho su aparición y que se estaba mordiendo el labio inferior y apretando las manos para no echarse a llorar. Lydgate se sintió muy desdichado… lleno de indignación, sentía al mismo tiempo que era poco caballeroso dar rienda suelta a su cólera en aquel momento.

—Lo siento mucho, Rosamond; ya sé que es muy cruel.

—Creí, por lo menos, cuando me resigné a devolver los cubiertos y a que se hiciera el inventario de los muebles… estaba convencida de que bastaría con eso.

—Te lo expliqué entonces, querida. Se trataba solo de una garantía y detrás de la garantía está la deuda. Y la deuda hay que pagarla durante los próximos meses, porque de lo contrario será preciso vender los muebles. Si el joven Plymdale se queda con la casa y con la mayor parte de lo que hay dentro, estaremos en condiciones de pagar esa deuda y también algunas más y nos habremos librado de una vivienda que es demasiado cara para nosotros. Podemos conseguir una casa más pequeña: sé que Trumbull tiene una muy aceptable por treinta libras al año; esta, en cambio, nos cuesta noventa. —Lydgate pronunció aquel pequeño discurso con el tono brusco y machacón con que de ordinario tratamos de hacer que penetren unos hechos incontrovertibles en un entendimiento poco dado a las precisiones. Las lágrimas rodaron lentamente por las mejillas de Rosamond, que se limitó a enjugarlas con el pañuelo mientras contemplaba el gran jarrón sobre la repisa de la chimenea. Era el momento de más intensa amargura que había vivido jamás. Finalmente dijo, sin prisa, y subrayando cuidadosamente cada palabra:

—Nunca hubiese creído que te gustara comportarte de esa manera.

—¿Gustarme? —estalló Lydgate, levantándose de la silla, metiendo las manos en los bolsillos y apartándose a grandes zancadas de la chimenea—; no es una cuestión de gustos. Claro que no me gusta; es lo único que puedo hacer. —Giró en redondo, volviéndose hacia ella.

—Yo hubiera pensado que existían otras maneras mucho mejores que esa —dijo Rosamond—. Organicemos una subasta y marchémonos de Middlemarch.

—¿Para hacer qué? ¿De qué sirve que abandone mi trabajo en Middlemarch para ir a otro sitio donde no lo tengo? En cualquier otra parte tendremos tan poco dinero como aquí —dijo Lydgate, con tono más enojado.

—Si llegamos a encontrarnos en esa situación será enteramente culpa tuya, Tertius —dijo Rosamond, volviéndose para hablar con la mayor convicción imaginable—. No has querido comportarte como debes con tu familia. Ofendiste al capitán Lydgate. Sir Godwin me trató con mucho cariño cuando estuvimos en Quallingham y estoy segura de que, si le mostraras el debido respeto y le contaras tu situación, haría cualquier cosa por ti. Pero en lugar de eso, prefieres cederle la casa y los muebles a Ned Plymdale.

Algo parecido a la ferocidad se asomó a los ojos de Lydgate mientras respondía con violencia renovada:

—De acuerdo entonces; puesto que así lo quieres, muy bien: me gusta ceder a otro la casa y los muebles. Reconozco que lo prefiero a hacer el tonto mendigando inútilmente. Así que ya lo sabes: eso es lo que me gusta.

El tono con que pronunció aquella última frase era equivalente a la presión de su robusta mano sobre el delicado brazo de Rosamond. Su voluntad, sin embargo, no era más fuerte que la de su mujer. Rosamond abandonó de inmediato la habitación sin decir nada, pero decidida a impedir que Lydgate se saliera con la suya.

El joven médico se marchó de su casa, pero a medida que recobraba la calma fue comprendiendo que el resultado más importante de aquella discusión era un sedimento de miedo en su interior ante la idea de volver a tratar con su mujer asuntos que pudieran empujarlo una vez más a usar palabras violentas. Era como si hubiese aparecido una grieta en un cristal muy delicado y tuviera miedo de que el menor movimiento acabara de romperlo. Su matrimonio sería un buen ejemplo de amarga ironía si no siguieran queriéndose. Hacía mucho tiempo que había llegado a una conclusión sobre cuáles eran los aspectos más negativos del carácter de su mujer: la falta de sensibilidad, que se manifestaba en la desconsideración tanto hacia los deseos concretos de su marido como hacia sus objetivos más amplios. Había logrado superar el primer gran desengaño: era preciso renunciar a la devoción tierna y a la adoración sumisa de la esposa ideal y aceptar la vida a un nivel más bajo de esperanzas, como sucede con los hombres que han perdido los brazos o las piernas. Pero la esposa real tenía, además de exigencias, un dominio sobre su corazón, y Lydgate deseaba con gran intensidad que aquel dominio no perdiera nada de su fuerza. En el matrimonio, la

certeza de que «nunca me querrá mucho» es más fácil de soportar que el temor a «ya nunca la querré». De aquí que, después del estallido, sus esfuerzos interiores se consagraran enteramente a excusarla y a culpar de lo sucedido a las duras circunstancias de las que él era en parte responsable. Aquella noche trató, acariciándola, de curar la herida que había abierto por la mañana, y no entraba en la manera de ser de Rosamond rechazar sus avances o mostrarse malhumorada; de hecho recibió complacida aquella prueba de que su marido la quería y no escapaba a su control. Pero eso era algo muy distinto a quererlo ella.

Lydgate habría preferido no volver a mencionar el plan de deshacerse de la casa; estaba decidido a llevarlo a cabo y a hablar de ello lo menos posible. Pero Rosamond lo sacó a relucir mientras desayunaban, diciendo plácidamente:

—¿Has hablado ya con Trumbull?

—No; pero entraré a verlo cuando pase por su casa. No hay que perder tiempo —respondió Lydgate, aceptando la pregunta de Rosamond como una señal de que renunciaba a oponerse y besándola en la frente con gran cariño al levantarse para salir.

Tan pronto como llegó la hora de hacer visitas, Rosamond se presentó en casa de la señora Plymdale, la madre de Ned, y abordó, felicitándola cumplidamente, el tema de la próxima boda de su hijo. El punto de vista de la señora Plymdale era que quizá ahora, y de manera retrospectiva, Rosamond vislumbrara su insensatez y, convencida de que en aquel momento todas las ventajas estaban de parte de su hijo, su bondad la inclinó a comportarse amablemente.

—Sí, Ned es muy feliz, tengo que decirlo. Y Sophy Toller lo mejor que cabe desear como nuera. Por supuesto su padre está en condiciones de ser generoso con ella… cabía esperarlo, lógicamente, con una fábrica de cerveza como la suya. En cuestión de familia política no podíamos desear nada mejor. Pero no es eso lo que más me importa. Sophy es una muchacha encantadora… que no se da aires ni tiene pretensiones, aunque está a la altura de las mejores. No me refiero a la aristocracia con títulos. No veo con buenos ojos a las personas que quieren salirse de su esfera. Quiero decir que Sophy está a la altura de lo mejor de la ciudad y que se contenta con eso.

—Siempre la he considerado una muchacha muy agradable —dijo Rosamond.

—Ned, que nunca ha presumido más de la cuenta, se ha visto recompensado, en mi opinión, con una inmejorable familia política —continuó la señora Plymdale, dulcificada su natural agudeza por el ferviente convencimiento de que su punto de vista era el correcto—. Y al ser los Toller unas personas tan exigentes, podrían haber puesto objeciones porque algunos de nuestros amigos no pertenecen a su círculo. Es bien conocido que tu tía Harriet y yo hemos sido íntimas desde jóvenes y que el señor Plymdale ha estado siempre de parte del señor Bulstrode. Yo misma prefiero una moral más rigurosa. Pero los Toller han recibido a Ned con los brazos abiertos de todas formas.

—Estoy segura de que es un joven muy meritorio, de excelentes principios —dijo Rosamond, con un tono inconfundible de condescendencia, en respuesta a la sana reprimenda de la señora Plymdale.

—Claro está que no tiene el estilo de un capitán del ejército, ni se comporta como si todo el mundo fuese su inferior, ni es la suya una manera muy brillante de hablar y de cantar, ni grande su capacidad intelectual. Pero doy gracias al cielo por ello. Lo contrario es una pobre preparación para esta vida y para la venidera.

—Sí, por supuesto; las apariencias tienen muy poco que ver con la felicidad —dijo Rosamond—. Estoy convencida de que serán muy felices. ¿En qué casa van a vivir?

—De momento tendrán que conformarse con lo que encuentren. Han visto la casa de St Peter's Place, junto a la del señor Hackbutt, que es el propietario y la está dejando muy bien arreglada. No creo que sepan de otra mejor. Creo incluso que Ned se va a decidir hoy mismo.

—Parece ser una casa agradable; a mí me gusta St Peter's Place.

—Bueno; está cerca de la iglesia y en un barrio elegante. Pero las ventanas son estrechas y las habitaciones están todas a distintas alturas. ¿No sabrás de alguna otra casa desocupada? —dijo la señora Plymdale, clavando sus redondos ojos negros en Rosamond con la animación de una idea repentina.

—¡Oh, no! Estoy muy poco al tanto de esas cuestiones.

Rosamond no había previsto aquella pregunta ni su respuesta al prepararse para la visita; deseaba solo reunir la información necesaria para no tener que separarse de su casa en circunstancias muy desagradables. En cuanto a faltar a la verdad con su respuesta, Rosamond reflexionó tan poco sobre ello como sobre faltar a la verdad cuando había afirmado que las apariencias tenían muy poco que ver con la felicidad. Su objetivo —estaba totalmente convencida— se hallaba plenamente justificado; lo inexcusable eran las intenciones de Lydgate; y ella tenía ya un plan que, una vez plenamente realizado, demostraría hasta qué punto sería un paso en falso que Tertius renunciara a su posición actual.

Rosamond volvió a su casa pasando por el despacho del señor Borthrop Trumbull, con intención de visitarlo. Era la primera vez en su vida que se le ocurría hacer algo relacionado con cuestiones de negocios, pero no sintió la menor inquietud. La resistencia a aceptar algo que tanto le desagradaba había transformado su reposada tenacidad en activa capacidad de invención. Dadas las circunstancias no bastaba simplemente con desobedecer y mostrarse serena y plácidamente obstinada: tenía que obrar de acuerdo con su discernimiento, y Rosamond se decía que sus conclusiones eran correctas… «de hecho, si no fuera así, no habría querido llevarlas a la práctica».

El señor Trumbull estaba en la trastienda de su oficina y recibió a Rosamond con sus mejores modales, no solo porque era sensible a su atractivo, sino porque sus fibras bondadosas se conmovían al tener la seguridad de que Lydgate pasaba apuros y de que aquella mujer tan bonita, aquella joven señora del más alto encanto personal, sentía probablemente el aguijón del infortunio… al verse envuelta en circunstancias que escapaban a su control. Le suplicó que le hiciera el honor de tomar asiento y se quedó de pie ante ella acicalándose el pelo y comportándose con gran solicitud, que era en su mayor parte desinteresada. La primera pregunta de Rosamond fue si su marido le había visitado aquella mañana para hablarle de la posibilidad de deshacerse de su casa.

—Sí, señora, sí; ha venido a verme, efectivamente —dijo el excelente subastador, tratando de incluir un componente tranquilizador en sus reiteraciones—. Me disponía a cumplimentar su encargo, si es posible, esta misma tarde. Me ha pedido que no lo retrasara.

—Pues yo vengo a decirle que no siga adelante, señor Trumbull; y le suplico que no mencione lo que le ha dicho sobre este asunto. ¿Hará lo que le pido?

—Claro que sí, señora Lydgate, por supuesto. Las confidencias son sagradas para mí tanto en los negocios como en cualquier otra faceta de la vida. ¿Debo entonces dar por retirado el encargo? —dijo el señor Trumbull, ajustándose los largos extremos de su corbata azul con ambas manos y mirando a Rosamond con gesto deferente.

—Así es, si no tiene usted inconveniente. He sabido que Ned Plymdale ha tomado ya una casa… la que está en St Peter's Place junto a la del señor Hackbutt. Al señor Lydgate no le gustaría que se diera curso a sus instrucciones sin necesidad. Y además hay otras circunstancias que hacen innecesaria esa medida.

—Muy bien, señora Lydgate, muy bien. Estoy a su disposición, siempre que necesite usted de mí algún servicio —dijo el señor Trumbull, que se alegró al imaginar que el joven médico había encontrado solución a sus problemas—. Cuente conmigo, se lo suplico. Este asunto no seguirá adelante.

Aquella noche Lydgate se sintió algo reconfortado al observar que Rosamond estaba más animada que en los últimos días y que incluso parecía interesada en tratar de complacerlo de manera espontánea. «Si ella es feliz y yo salgo adelante aunque sea con dificultades, ¿qué importancia tiene todo lo demás? —pensó—. No es más que un trecho pantanoso que tenemos que cruzar en un viaje muy largo. Si consigo tener otra vez la cabeza clara, todo se arreglará».

Se sintió tan animado que se puso a buscar la descripción de unos experimentos que tenía intención de comprobar desde hacía tiempo, pero que había ido retrasando por esa desesperación insidiosa que es consecuencia de ansiedades mezquinas. Sintió de nuevo algo del antiguo y delicioso ensimismamiento en una investigación de largo alcance, mientras Rosamond interpretaba una música tranquila, tan útil para su meditación como el chapoteo de un remo en el lago al caer la noche. Era bastante tarde; Lydgate había apartado todos los libros y estaba mirando el fuego con las manos juntas detrás de la cabeza, olvidado de todo, excepto de la preparación de un nuevo experimento que sirviera de comprobación, cuando Rosamond, que había dejado el piano y estaba reclinada en su sillón contemplándolo, dijo:

—Ned Plymdale ya ha alquilado una casa.

Lydgate, sorprendido e irritado, alzó la vista un momento sin hablar, como un hombre a quien alguien hubiera molestado mientras dormía. Luego, notando con desagrado que estaba enrojeciendo, preguntó:

—¿Cómo lo sabes?

—He ido esta mañana a ver a la señora Plymdale y me ha dicho que su hijo ha alquilado la casa de St Peter's Place, junto a la del señor Hackbutt.

Lydgate no dijo nada. Separó las manos que tenía detrás de la cabeza y las apretó contra el pelo que, como de ordinario, le tapaba la frente, apoyando al mismo tiempo los codos sobre las rodillas. Sentía una amarga desilusión, como si hubiera abierto una puerta para salir de un sitio sofocante y se encontrara con que estaba tapiada; tuvo además la seguridad de que Rosamond veía con agrado la causa de su desilusión. Prefirió no mirarla ni decir nada hasta que hubiera superado el primer ataque de indignación. Después de todo, se dijo, lleno de amargura, ¿qué otra cosa puede preocupar tanto a una mujer como su casa y sus muebles? Sin ellos un marido no sirve para nada. Cuando alzó la vista y se apartó el pelo de la frente, sus

ojos oscuros reflejaban un doloroso vacío, la seguridad de saberse incomprendido, pero sus labios dijeron tan solo, con entonación fría:

—Quizá surja alguien más. Le dije a Trumbull que estuviera atento si fallaba Plymdale.

Rosamond no hizo ningún comentario. Confiaba en que el azar impidiera una nueva comunicación entre su marido y el subastador antes de que nuevos acontecimientos justificaran su intromisión; en cualquier caso, había evitado lo que más temor le inspiraba de inmediato. Después de una pausa, preguntó:

—¿Cuánto dinero quieren esas personas tan desagradables?

—¿Qué personas desagradables?

—Los que hicieron el inventarlo… y los otros. En resumen: ¿cuánto dinero los dejaría satisfechos para que tú no tuvieses que preocuparte más?

Lydgate la examinó durante un momento, como si buscase síntomas, y luego dijo:

—Si hubiera conseguido seiscientas libras de Plymdale por los muebles y en concepto de traspaso, habría podido salir adelante. Habría pagado a Dover y daría lo suficiente a cuenta para que los demás esperaran pacientemente, si nosotros reducíamos gastos.

—Pero yo me refiero a lo que necesitarías si nos quedáramos en esta casa.

—Más de lo que es posible que consiga en ningún sitio —dijo Lydgate, con un áspero tono de sarcasmo en la voz. Le enojaba darse cuenta de que la imaginación de Rosamond se entretenía con deseos imposibles en lugar de afrontar esfuerzos posibles.

—¿Por qué no quieres decirme la cantidad? —preguntó Rosamond, dando una reposada indicación de que no le gustaban sus modales.

—Bueno —respondió Lydgate, en tono de quien se arriesga a una conjetura—, harían falta por lo menos mil libras para quedarme tranquilo. Pero —añadió con tono cortante— tengo que considerar lo que debo hacer sin ellas, no con ellas.

Rosamond no dijo nada más.

Al día siguiente, sin embargo, llevó a efecto su plan de escribir a sir Godwin Lydgate. Desde la visita del capitán, Rosamond había recibido una carta de este último y otra de la señora Mengan, su hermana casada, dándole el pésame por la pérdida del niño y expresando vagamente la esperanza de volver a verla en Quallingham. Lydgate le había dicho que aquellas muestras de cortesía no significaban nada; pero Rosamond estaba secretamente convencida de que si las relaciones con la familia de Lydgate empeoraban era por el comportamiento frío y desdeñoso de su marido, por lo que contestó a las dos cartas con su estilo más cautivador, con la casi total seguridad de que de ellas saldría una invitación a visitarlos. Pero la respuesta fue el silencio. El capitán, evidentemente, no era muy dado a escribir y a Rosamond se le ocurrió que quizá sus hermanas se hallasen en el extranjero. Había llegado, de todos modos, el momento de pensar en los parientes que sí estaban en Inglaterra y, sobre todo, en que sir Godwin, que le había acariciado la barbilla, comparándola con la señora Croly, la celebrada belleza que le robara el corazón en 1790, se conmovería ante cualquier petición suya y le gustaría, por consideración a Rosamond, comportarse de manera magnánima con su sobrino. La señora Lydgate creía ingenuamente que un anciano caballero debía hacer todo lo posible para evitarle a ella situaciones desagradables. Y escribió lo que le pareció la más juiciosa carta imaginable —una carta que serviría para que sir Godwin advirtiera su extraordinario buen sentido—, señalando cuán deseable era que Tertius abandonara un sitio como Middlemarch por otro más acorde con su talento, cómo el carácter desagradable de sus habitantes había estorbado su éxito profesional y cómo, en consecuencia, tenía dificultades económicas y necesitaría mil libras para superarlas por completo. No explicó que Tertius ignoraba su decisión de escribir, porque suponía que su marido no habría podido estar en desacuerdo con lo que se decía en la carta de su gran respeto por su tío Godwin, a quien consideraba el mejor amigo entre todos sus familiares. Tal era la fuerza de las tácticas de la pobre Rosamond ahora que había decidido aplicarlas a los negocios del mundo.

Esto sucedió antes de la fiesta del día de Año Nuevo y aún no había llegado la respuesta de sir Godwin. Pero durante la mañana de aquel mismo día Lydgate supo que Rosamond había anulado el encargo hecho a Borthrop Trumbull. Como consideraba necesario que su mujer se fuera acostumbrando gradualmente a la idea de abandonar la casa de Lowick Gate, el joven médico superó su desgana de hablar de nuevo con ella de aquel tema y, cuando estaban desayunando, dijo:

—Iré a ver a Trumbull hoy por la mañana, para decirle que anuncie la casa en el *Pionero* y en la *Trompeta*. Si se le da publicidad, quizá se decida alguien que de otra manera no hubiera pensado nunca en mudarse. En estas ciudades de provincias mucha gente sigue en su vieja casa a pesar de tener una familia demasiado grande porque no saben cómo encontrar otra. Y Trumbull no parece que tenga mucha garra.

Rosamond comprendió que había llegado el inevitable momento.

—Fui yo quien le dijo a Trumbull que no hiciera más pesquisas —dijo, con una gran calma que era sin duda defensiva.

Lydgate se la quedó mirando enmudecido por el asombro. Tan solo media hora antes la había ayudado a sujetarse las trenzas y había utilizado el lenguaje íntimo del afecto, lenguaje que, sin llegar a hablarlo a su vez, Rosamond aceptaba como si fuese una serena y encantadora imagen sagrada que, de cuando en cuando, sonreía milagrosamente a su adorador, mostrándole sus hoyuelos. Con aquel recuerdo todavía tan reciente en la memoria, la sorpresa de Lydgate no pudo convertirse de inmediato en decidido enfado; se trataba más bien de dolorida confusión. Dejó el cuchillo y el tenedor con que trinchaba la carne y, echándose hacia atrás en la silla, dijo finalmente, con un frío tono irónico en la voz:

—¿Puedo preguntarte cuándo y por qué hiciste eso?

—Cuando supe que los Plymdale habían elegido casa le visité para decirle que no les hablara de la nuestra; y al mismo tiempo le dije que no llevara adelante el asunto. Sabía que sería muy perjudicial para ti que se hiciera público tu deseo de desprenderte de la casa y de los muebles y yo estaba muy en contra de ello. Creo que bastaban esos motivos.

—Carecía por supuesto de importancia que yo te hubiera proporcionado razones imperativas de otro tipo; como tampoco importaba que yo hubiera llegado a una conclusión distinta, dando instrucciones de acuerdo con ella —dijo Lydgate, mordazmente, con los truenos y los relámpagos juntándose alrededor de su frente y de sus ojos.

El efecto de la cólera de cualquier persona sobre Rosamond había sido siempre lograr que se retrajera llena de fría repugnancia, y que adoptara una actitud de mayor calma y corrección, convencida de que ella nunca perdería el control, hicieran lo que hiciesen los demás.

—Creo —replicó— que tenía perfecto derecho a hablar de algo que me concierne por lo menos tanto como a ti.

—Claro que sí… tenías derecho a hablar, pero solo conmigo. No a contradecir mis órdenes en secreto y a tratarme como si fuera un imbécil —dijo Lydgate, en el mismo tono que antes. Luego continuó, con añadido desprecio—: ¿Es posible hacerte entender cuáles serán las consecuencias? ¿Servirá de algo que te diga de nuevo por qué tenemos que intentar desprendernos de la casa?

—No es necesario que me lo expliques otra vez —dijo Rosamond, con una voz que fue cayendo lentamente como frías gotas de agua—. Recuerdo lo que dijiste. Me hablaste con la misma violencia que ahora. Pero eso no modifica mi opinión de que deberías intentar cualquier otra cosa antes de dar un paso que me resulta tan doloroso. Y en cuanto a anunciar públicamente el traspaso de la casa, creo que sería degradante para ti.

—Y, ¿supongamos que yo paso por encima de tu opinión como tú has pasado por encima de la mía?

—Puedes hacerlo, por supuesto. Pero creo que deberías haberme dicho antes de casarnos que aceptarías colocarme en una situación insostenible antes que renunciar a tu voluntad.

Lydgate no respondió; tan solo ladeó la cabeza y torció las comisuras de la boca, desesperado. Rosamond, al advertir que no la estaba mirando, se levantó y le puso delante la taza de café; pero él no se dio cuenta y siguió con su drama interior y su razonamiento, moviéndose en la silla de vez en cuando, apoyando un brazo sobre la mesa y pasándose una mano por el pelo. Emociones e ideas simultáneas no le permitían entregarse por completo a la cólera ni perseverar rígidamente en su anterior resolución. Rosamond se aprovechó de su silencio.

—Cuando nos casamos, todo el mundo creía que tenías una posición muy elevada. Nunca habría podido imaginar que quisieras vender nuestros muebles y alquilar una casa en Bride Street, donde las habitaciones son como jaulas. Si hemos de vivir de esa manera, vayámonos al menos de Middlemarch.

—Las razones que has enumerado serían muy poderosas —dijo Lydgate, medio irónicamente (aún persistía una mustia palidez en torno a sus labios mientras contemplaba el café sin bebérselo)—, serían muy poderosas si no fuera porque debo dinero.

—Estoy segura de que muchas personas han tenido deudas parecidas pero, si son gente respetable, los demás confían en ellos. Recuerdo haberle oído decir a papá que los Torbit tenían deudas, pero siguieron adelante perfectamente. Nunca es bueno actuar con precipitación —dijo Rosamond con tranquila sabiduría.

Lydgate continuó paralizado por impulsos contrarios: puesto que ninguno de los razonamientos ofrecidos parecía capaz de obtener el asentimiento de Rosamond, quería romper y triturar algún objeto en el que pudiera al menos producir una impresión o, de lo contrario, decirle a su mujer brutalmente que él mandaba y ella tenía que obedecer. Pero Lydgate no solo temía el efecto de medidas tan extremas en su vida en común: cada vez era mayor el miedo que le inspiraba la obstinación tranquila y escurridiza de Rosamond, que impedía que cualquier afirmación resultara definitiva; y, una vez más, su mujer había

tocado un punto muy doloroso al dar a entender que había ido al matrimonio engañada. Y decir que era él quien mandaba no respondía a la realidad. La resolución básica a la que había llegado por la fuerza de la lógica y el sentido del honor estaba empezando a ceder ante la labor de zapa de Rosamond. Lydgate se bebió la mitad de la taza de café y a continuación se levantó para marcharse.

—Te pediría al menos que no fueras a ver a Trumbull ahora mismo… hasta que se haya visto que no queda otra alternativa —dijo Rosamond. Aunque no se asustaba fácilmente, le pareció más seguro no revelar en aquel momento que había escrito a sir Godwin—. Prométeme que no irás a verlo durante unas cuantas semanas o sin decírmelo antes.

Lydgate lanzó una breve carcajada.

—Creo que soy yo quien tendría que conseguir la promesa de que no harás nada sin decírmelo —dijo, volviendo la vista hacia ella con severidad y dirigiéndose luego hacia la puerta.

—¿Te acuerdas de que cenamos en casa de papá? —preguntó Rosamond, deseando que su marido se diera la vuelta y le hiciera una concesión mucho más explícita.

Pero Lydgate respondió únicamente: «Sí, claro», con tono impaciente y se marchó.

A Rosamond le parecía odioso que su marido no considerase suficiente castigo las dolorosas renuncias que quería imponerle y tuviera que acompañarlas además con unos modales tan desagradables. Y al pedirle una cosa tan razonable como que retrasara la segunda visita a Trumbull, era una crueldad por su parte no comprometerse a complacerla. Rosamond estaba convencida de haber obrado de la mejor manera posible desde cualquier punto de vista; y cada enfado o cada avalancha de palabras coléricas por parte de Lydgate solo servía para añadir una nueva anotación en su registro mental de agravios. La pobre Rosamond llevaba ya meses asociando a su marido con sentimientos de desencanto, y la relación matrimonial, que tantas restricciones le imponía, había perdido todo su atractivo como trampolín para sueños maravillosos. Casarse la había librado de las cosas desagradables del hogar paterno, pero no le había dado todo lo que quería y esperaba. El Lydgate del que estuvo enamorada era un conjunto de cosas agradables, en su mayor parte desaparecidas y sustituidas por molestos detalles cotidianos con los que era necesario convivir de hora en hora, sin la posibilidad de flotar, atravesándolos, mediante una rápida selección de momentos favorables. Las costumbres ligadas al ejercicio profesional de Lydgate, su preocupación por los temas científicos, que a ella le parecían casi dignos de los gustos morbosos de un vampiro, sus peculiares opiniones sobre cosas nunca tratadas en los diálogos del noviazgo; todas aquellas influencias lo distanciaban de ella, e incluso, prescindiendo del hecho de haberse colocado en una situación desventajosa en la ciudad y del primer sobresalto al enterarse de la deuda pendiente con Dover, habrían bastado para que le resultase aburrida la presencia de su marido. Otra persona le había supuesto, incluso desde los primeros días de su matrimonio y hasta hacía cuatro meses, un agradable estímulo, pero ahora estaba ausente; Rosamond no se confesaba a sí misma hasta qué punto el vacío dejado por Will se relacionaba con su *ennui*; y le parecía (quizá con razón) que una invitación a Quallingham y una posibilidad de trabajo que permitiera a Lydgate instalarse en otro sitio —Londres o cualquier ciudad libre de cosas indeseables— resultarían muy beneficiosas para ella y la volverían indiferente a la ausencia de Ladislaw, quien todavía le inspiraba cierto resentimiento por sus exaltadas palabras sobre la señora Casaubon.

Tal era el estado de cosas entre Lydgate y Rosamond el día de Año Nuevo cuando cenaron en casa del señor Vincy, ella mirándolo con un aire suavemente neutral en recuerdo de su comportamiento malhumorado durante el desayuno, y él víctima de una tribulación mucho más honda, debida al conflicto interior del que la escena matutina no era más que otra entre sus muchas manifestaciones. Su reacción mientras hablaba con el señor Farebrother —su reacción después de pretender cínicamente que todos los medios de conseguir dinero eran esencialmente idénticos y que el imperio de la casualidad reduce a una necia ilusión toda posibilidad de elegir— no era más que el síntoma de una resolución tambaleante, de una respuesta entumecida ante los viejos estímulos del entusiasmo.

¿Qué podía hacer? Veía, aun con más claridad que Rosamond, las melancólicas consecuencias de llevarla a la pequeña casa de Bride Street, donde tendría muy pocos muebles a su alrededor y el alma llena de descontento: una vida de privaciones y la existencia con Rosamond eran dos imágenes que se habían hecho progresivamente más irreconciliables desde que surgió la amenaza de unas deudas improrrogables. Pero, incluso aunque sus resoluciones hubieran obligado a combinarse a aquellas dos imágenes, los preliminares necesarios para cambio tan difícil no se hallaban a su alcance. Y aunque no había hecho la promesa que su mujer le pidiera, Lydgate no fue a visitar de nuevo a Trumbull. Empezó incluso a pensar en hacer un rápido viaje al norte para ver a sir Godwin. En otro tiempo había creído que nada le empujaría a pedir dinero a su tío, pero entonces no conocía aún la terrible presión de posibilidades aún más ingratas. No cabía confiar en el efecto de una carta; tan solo mediante una entrevista, por desagradable que pudiera

resultarle, estaría en condiciones de dar una completa explicación y de poner a prueba el vínculo familiar. Tan pronto como Lydgate empezó a considerar aquel paso como el más fácil, se produjo en su alma una reacción de cólera por el hecho de que él —que había decidido desde hacía tanto tiempo vivir al margen de cálculos tan abyectos, de la ansiedad egoísta ante las inclinaciones y el bolsillo de hombres con quienes le parecía un timbre de gloria no tener ninguna meta en común— hubiera caído no solo a su mismo nivel, sino al de tener que solicitar su ayuda.

Capítulo LXV

Uno de los dos tiene por fuerza que ceder;
y puesto que el varón es más razonable
que la mujer, vosotros [los varones] habéis de tener paciencia.

CHAUCER, *Cuentos de Canterbury*

La inclinación de la naturaleza humana a retrasar la correspondencia triunfa incluso sobre la actual aceleración en la marcha general de las cosas; ¿qué hay por tanto de sorprendente en que en 1832 el viejo sir Godwin Lydgate tardara en escribir una carta que tenía más importancia para otros que para él? Habían transcurrido cerca de tres semanas del nuevo año y Rosamond, esperando la respuesta a su cautivadora petición, sufría diarios desengaños. Lydgate, totalmente ignorante de sus esperanzas, veía llegar las facturas y consideraba inminente que Dover hiciera uso de la ventaja que tenía sobre otros acreedores. Nunca había mencionado a Rosamond su proyecto de ir a Quallingham: no quería admitir hasta el último momento algo que su mujer consideraría una concesión a sus deseos después de su indignada negativa; pero esperaba ponerse muy pronto en camino. Una de las líneas del ferrocarril ya en funcionamiento le permitiría realizar el viaje de ida y vuelta en cuatro días.

Pero una mañana, después de que Lydgate se hubiera marchado, llegó una carta dirigida a él, que Rosamond reconoció en el acto como de sir Godwin, e hizo que se sintiera llena de esperanza. Quizá dentro hubiera una nota para ella; si bien, como era lógico, todo lo relativo al dinero u otro tipo de ayuda había de tratarse con Lydgate, y el hecho de que su marido fuera el destinatario, más aún, el mismo retraso en escribir, parecía garantizar una respuesta positiva. Rosamond se agitó demasiado con aquellas ideas para ocuparse en otra cosa que no fueran unos hilvanes en un tibio rincón del comedor, con el sobre que albergaba la carta trascendental descansando sobre la mesa que tenía delante. Hacia las doce oyó los pasos de su marido en el pasillo, abrió la puerta lo más deprisa que pudo, y dijo con tono despreocupado:

—Tertius, ven… hay una carta para ti.

—Ah —dijo él; sin quitarse el sombrero, dio un rodeo en torno a su mujer para coger la carta—. ¡Mi tío Godwin! —exclamó, mientras Rosamond volvía a sentarse y lo contemplaba durante el proceso de abrir el sobre, esperando muestras de sorpresa de su parte.

Mientras los ojos de Lydgate recorrían rápidamente la breve carta, su mujer vio cómo su rostro, habitualmente de color moreno pálido, adquiría una extraña blancura; los labios y las ventanillas de la nariz le temblaban cuando arrojó la carta delante de Rosamond y dijo con violencia:

—Será imposible soportar la vida contigo si actúas siempre en secreto… si obras contra mí y ocultas tus acciones.

Lydgate se contuvo inmediatamente y le volvió la espalda. Luego giró en redondo, paseó unos instantes, se sentó, volvió a levantarse desasosegado, agarrando con fuerza los objetos que llevaba en lo más hondo de los bolsillos. Tenía miedo a decir algo irremediablemente cruel.

También Rosamond había cambiado de color mientras leía. El contenido de la carta era el siguiente:

Querido Tertius:

No hagas que me escriba tu mujer cuando tengas que pedirme algo. Es una maniobra tortuosa y aduladora que nunca hubiera esperado de ti. No me gusta escribir a una mujer sobre cuestiones de

negocios. En cuanto a proporcionarte mil libras o solo la mitad de esa suma, no estoy en condiciones de hacer nada parecido. Mi propia familia me saca hasta el último penique. Con dos hijos jóvenes y tres hijas, no es fácil que tenga dinero sobrante. Parece que has acabado con el tuyo bastante deprisa y que has conseguido organizar un buen lío en el sitio donde estás. Pero yo no tengo nada que ver con personas de tu profesión y no puedo ayudarte en ese aspecto. Hice las cosas lo mejor que pude como tutor tuyo y permití que siguieras tus deseos dedicándote a la medicina. Podrías haber entrado en el ejército o en la Iglesia. El dinero de que disponías habría bastado para ello y hubieras tenido ante ti una carrera mucho más segura. Tu tío Charles te guarda rencor por no haber seguido su profesión, pero yo no. Siempre he querido que te fueran bien las cosas, pero ahora has de considerarte una persona independiente. Afectuosamente, tu tío

GODWIN LYDGATE

Cuando Rosamond hubo terminado de leer la carta se quedó completamente inmóvil, con las manos cruzadas, evitando que se trasluciera su vivo desencanto y atrincherándose en su sosegada pasividad contra la cólera de su marido. Lydgate hizo una pausa en sus movimientos, la miró de nuevo y dijo, con cáustica severidad:

—¿Bastará esto para convencerte del daño que puedes hacer entremetiéndote a escondidas? ¿Tienes el suficiente sentido común para reconocer tu incompetencia a la hora de juzgar y actuar en mi lugar? ¿Reconoces que no puedes intervenir con tu ignorancia en asuntos que son de mi competencia? —Las palabras eran duras; pero no era la primera vez que se frustraban los planes de Lydgate por la intromisión de su mujer. Rosamond no lo miró ni dio respuesta alguna—. Estaba casi decidido a ir a Quallingham. Me habría resultado bastante doloroso hacerlo, pero quizá hubiese servido de algo. Pero da igual lo que yo haya pensado. Siempre has estado llevándome la contraria en secreto. Me engañas con un falso asentimiento y luego me encuentro a merced de tus trapicheos. Si te propones contrariar todos mis deseos, dilo y desafíame. Por lo menos sabré a qué atenerme.

Es un momento terrible en una vida joven aquel en que se descubre que la intimidad del vínculo amoroso se ha transformado en capacidad para hostigar. A pesar del dominio que Rosamond tenía sobre sí misma, una lágrima le cayó silenciosamente por la mejilla hasta los labios. Continuó de todas formas sin decir nada; pero su quietud escondía una reacción muy intensa: Rosamond sentía un desagrado tan profundo por su marido que deseaba no haberlo visto nunca. La descortesía de sir Godwin con ella y su total falta de consideración lo situaban junto a Dover y todos los demás acreedores… personas desagradables que solo pensaban en sí mismas y a quienes tenía sin cuidado lo molestos que le resultaran a ella. Incluso su padre era cruel y podía haber hecho más por ayudarlos. A decir verdad solo había una persona en el mundo de Rosamond que ella considerase libre de culpa y era la elegante criatura de trenzas rubias y manos cruzadas sobre el regazo que nunca se había expresado de manera inconveniente y obraba siempre con la mejor intención… porque lo mejor, naturalmente, era lo que a ella le gustaba más.

Lydgate, al hacer una pausa y mirarla, empezó a sentir ese desesperante sentimiento de impotencia que se apodera de las personas apasionadas cuando su ardor se enfrenta con un silencio de aspecto inocente y manso aire de víctima que hace que se sientan culpables, y que al final contamina con dudas acerca de su justicia incluso la indignación más razonada. Lydgate necesitó moderar sus palabras para recuperar el pleno sentimiento de que era él quien estaba en lo cierto.

—¿No te das cuenta, Rosamond —empezó de nuevo, tratando de mostrarse simplemente serio y no desagradable—, de que nada puede ser tan nefasto como la falta de sinceridad y de confianza entre nosotros? Todas las veces que he manifestado un deseo, parecía que estabas de acuerdo y, sin embargo, posteriormente me has desobedecido en secreto. De esa forma nunca sé qué creer. Nos quedaría cierta esperanza si quisieras admitirlo. ¿Es que soy un animal tan furioso y tan poco razonable? ¿Por qué no has de ser sincera conmigo?

Silencio todavía.

—¿Te comprometerías a decir que te has equivocado y que puedo confiar en que no obrarás a escondidas en el futuro? —dijo Lydgate, con tono apremiante, pero con un algo de súplica en el tono que Rosamond advirtió al instante. Cuando esta habló lo hizo con frialdad.

—No puedo admitir ni reconocer nada en respuesta a palabras como las que me has dirigido. No estoy acostumbrada a esa forma de hablar. Has hablado de mis «intromisiones a escondidas», de mis «ignorantes intervenciones» y de mis «falsos asentimientos». Yo no te he hablado nunca de esa manera y creo que deberías pedirme disculpas. Has afirmado que es imposible vivir conmigo. Desde luego no me has hecho la

existencia muy agradable en estos últimos tiempos. Creo que cabía esperar que yo tratase de evitar algunas de las privaciones que nuestro matrimonio ha echado sobre mis espaldas. —Otra lágrima cayó por su mejilla cuando dejó de hablar y Rosamond la hizo desaparecer con la misma discreción que la primera.

Lydgate se desplomó en una silla, sintiéndose totalmente derrotado. ¿Es que había algún sitio en la cabeza de Rosamond donde cupiera una reconvención? Se quitó el sombrero, pasó un brazo sobre el respaldo del asiento y bajó la vista unos momentos sin hablar. Su mujer tenía sobre él la doble ventaja de su insensibilidad a la carga de razón que había en sus reproches y de su clara percepción de las innegables dificultades que presentaba ahora su vida de casada. Aunque su duplicidad en el asunto de la casa iba más allá de lo que Lydgate sabía, al evitar incluso que los Plymdale se enteraran de que estaba disponible, Rosamond no era consciente de que su actuación pudiera ser definida en justicia como dolosa. No estamos obligados a catalogar nuestros actos de acuerdo con una clasificación estricta, como tampoco hemos de hacerlo con las existencias de nuestra tienda de comestibles o de ropa. Rosamond estaba convencida de que se la había ofendido y que era eso lo que su marido tenía que reconocer.

En cuanto a Lydgate, la necesidad de acomodarse al carácter de su mujer, de una inflexibilidad en proporción a su capacidad para negar los hechos más evidentes, le atenazaba. Intuía, alarmado, que Rosamond había dejado de quererlo y la consiguiente monotonía de sus vidas. La intensidad y la brusquedad de sus emociones hacía que aquel miedo alternara rápidamente con los primeros movimientos violentos de su indignación. Sin duda alguna habría sido por su parte una fanfarronada vacía de sentido decir que era dueño y señor de su mujer.

«No me has hecho la vida agradable en estos últimos tiempos»… «las privaciones que nuestro matrimonio ha echado sobre mis espaldas»… aquellas palabras aguijoneaban su imaginación de la misma forma que el dolor provoca pesadillas. ¿Y si, además de perder sus propósitos más elevados, se viera esclavizado por las horribles cadenas del odio doméstico?

—Rosamond —dijo, volviéndose hacia ella con una mirada llena de melancolía—, tienes que perdonar las palabras de una persona cuando se siente irritada y desilusionada. Tú y yo no podemos tener intereses opuestos. No me es posible separar mi felicidad de la tuya. Si me enfado contigo, es porque pareces no ver hasta qué punto nos divide cualquier ocultamiento. ¿Cómo podría yo desear crearte dificultades con mis palabras o con mi conducta? Cuando te hago daño, hago daño a una parte de mi propia vida. Nunca me enfadaría contigo si fueses completamente sincera conmigo.

—Solo he querido evitar que, sin ninguna necesidad, nos condujeras a toda prisa hacia la miseria —dijo Rosamond, con lágrimas más liberadoras ahora que su marido se había dulcificado—. Es demasiado duro caer en desgracia aquí, entre todas las personas que conocemos, y tener que vivir de una manera tan miserable. Quisiera haberme muerto con el niño.

Rosamond hablaba y lloraba con esa dulzura que hace omnipotentes palabras y lágrimas para un hombre de corazón amante. Lydgate acercó su silla a la de su esposa y apretó la delicada cabeza contra su mejilla con su tierna y poderosa mano. Solo la acarició; no dijo nada; porque ¿qué se podía decir? No estaba en condiciones de prometer que la protegería contra la temida miseria, porque no veía ningún medio seguro de hacerlo. Cuando la dejó para marcharse de nuevo, se dijo a sí mismo que la situación en que se hallaban era diez veces más dura para ella: él tenía una vida fuera del hogar y constantes requerimientos de su actividad en beneficio de otros. Quería excusarlo todo si le era posible… Pero, de manera inevitable, al adoptar aquella actitud exculpatoria, pensaba en Rosamond como si fuera un animal de una especie distinta y más débil cuando, en realidad, su mujer lo había dominado.

Capítulo LXVI

Una cosa es ser tentado, Escalo,
y otra caer.

SHAKESPEARE, *Medida por medida*

Lydgate tenía sin duda buenas razones para reflexionar sobre la importancia de la atención a su clientela como contrapeso de sus preocupaciones personales. Ya no contaba con suficiente energía sobrante ni para la investigación ni para el pensamiento especulativo, pero junto a la cabecera de sus pacientes los urgentes llamamientos a su pericia profesional y a su capacidad de comprensión le proporcionaban el impulso necesario para olvidarse de sí mismo. No se trataba simplemente del benéfico yugo de la rutina que permite vivir respetablemente a hombres estúpidos y con serenidad a otros que son muy desgraciados… Era una perpetua exigencia de nuevas e inmediatas aplicaciones del pensamiento y de tener en cuenta las necesidades y tribulaciones de otras personas. Muchos de nosotros, al volver la vista atrás sobre nuestra vida, diríamos que el hombre más amable que hemos conocido ha sido un médico, o quizá aquel cirujano cuyo delicado tacto, dirigido por una percepción muy bien informada, vino en nuestra ayuda con una caridad más sublime que la de los taumaturgos. Algo de esa caridad dos veces bendita acompañaba siempre a Lydgate en su trabajo en el hospital o en las casas particulares, resultándole más útil que un opiato para tranquilizarlo y sostenerlo en sus ansiedades y frente a su sentimiento de deterioro mental.

Las sospechas del señor Farebrother sobre el opiato estaban justificadas. Bajo la primera presión exasperante de dificultades previstas y la primera percepción de que su matrimonio, si se quería que no fuera una soledad esclavizada, tenía que convertirse en un constante esfuerzo por seguir queriendo sin preocuparse mucho de ser correspondido, Lydgate había probado una o dos veces una dosis de opio. Pero tan pasajeras escapatorias de las mazmorras del sufrimiento no llegaban a crearle hábito. Era un hombre fuerte, capaz de beber mucho vino, aunque no le gustara; y cuando los hombres que lo rodeaban consumían bebidas alcohólicas, él se dedicaba al agua con azúcar, sintiendo una compasión desdeñosa incluso por los primeros estadios de la euforia producida por el alcohol. Lo mismo le sucedía con el juego. En París había visto jugar mucho, y contemplaba a los jugadores como si se tratara de enfermos. Las posibilidades de ganar dinero de aquel modo le tentaban tan poco como la bebida. Pensaba entonces que las únicas ganancias que le interesaban tenían que conseguirse mediante un proceso consciente por el que elevadas y difíciles combinaciones llevaran a un resultado benéfico. El poder que Lydgate anhelaba no se podía representar por unas manos ávidas que sujetan un montón de monedas, ni por la satisfacción medio salvaje, medio estúpida, en los ojos de un hombre que se embolsa las apuestas de veinte compañeros cariacontecidos.

Pero de la misma manera que había probado el opio, sus pensamientos empezaron a considerar la posibilidad del juego… no por deseo de emociones, sino con una nostálgica mirada interior a una forma fácil de conseguir dinero que no generaba preguntas ni implicaba responsabilidades. Si hubiera estado en Londres o en París en aquel momento, es posible que semejantes ideas, secundadas por la oportunidad, le hubieran llevado a una casa de juego, no para seguir observando a los jugadores, sino para observar con ellos en hermanado afán. La repugnancia se habría visto superada por la inmensa necesidad de ganar, si la suerte era tan amable como para permitírselo. Un incidente, acaecido no mucho después de que la ilusoria idea de conseguir dinero de su tío quedara excluida, fue indicación importante del efecto que podría haber tenido cualquier oportunidad real de jugar por dinero.

La sala de billares de El Dragón Verde era sitio habitual de reunión de cierto grupo de habitantes de Middlemarch, a la mayoría de los cuales, entre otros nuestro conocido, el señor Bambridge, se consideraba personas disolutas. Fue allí donde el pobre Fred Vincy incurrió en parte de su deuda memorable, por perder dinero en apuestas y verse obligado a solicitar un préstamo a tan alegre compañero. En Middlemarch todo el mundo estaba al tanto de que en aquella sala se perdían y se ganaban buenas cantidades de dinero, y la consiguiente reputación de El Dragón Verde como lugar de disipación intensificaba en algunos sectores la tentación de frecuentarlo. Es probable que sus visitantes regulares, como los iniciados a la masonería, desearan que su discreción tuviera por objeto algo mucho más emocionante; no constituían, sin embargo, una comunidad cerrada, y muchos respetables ciudadanos de edad madura y otros más jóvenes aparecían por allí de cuando en cuando para ver qué sucedía. Lydgate, bien dotado físicamente para el billar y aficionado a él, había hecho una o dos veces uso de su turno con el taco en El Dragón Verde en los primeros días a raíz de su llegada a Middlemarch; pero después nunca dispuso de tiempo libre para jugar, ni sintió nostalgia por el trato social que allí se practicaba. Una noche, sin embargo, tuvo ocasión de buscar al señor Bambridge en aquella sala. El tratante se había comprometido a encontrar comprador para el buen caballo que aún le quedaba y que Lydgate había decidido sustituir por un jamelgo barato, confiando en ahorrarse quizá veinte libras mediante aquella reducción de su nivel de vida; y es que ahora, como ayuda para alimentar la paciencia de sus proveedores, le preocupaba cualquier cantidad, por pequeña que fuese. Entrar en El Dragón Verde al pasar por allí le ahorraría tiempo.

El señor Bambridge no había llegado aún, pero terminaría por aparecer, le explicó su amigo el señor Horrock; y Lydgate se quedó, jugando una partida para que el tiempo pasara más deprisa. Aquella noche el joven médico tenía el brillo peculiar en los ojos y la vivacidad desacostumbrada que el señor Farebrother había advertido ya en otra ocasión. Lo excepcional de su presencia llamó mucho la atención, ya que había en la sala bastantes residentes de Middlemarch, y varios espectadores, además de algunos jugadores, hacían apuestas con animación. Lydgate jugaba bien y se sentía seguro de sí mismo; las apuestas se sucedían a su alrededor y al calcular que las probables ganancias podrían doblar la suma que iba a ahorrarse con el caballo, empezó a apostar a su propio juego y ganó una y otra vez. El señor Bambridge había llegado ya, pero Lydgate no se dio cuenta. No solo estaba entusiasmado con su suerte, sino que vislumbraba ya la posibilidad de trasladarse a Brassing al día siguiente, donde las apuestas eran más altas y donde, tirando una vez con fuerza de aquel cebo diabólico, quizá lograra sacarlo sin quedar atrapado en el anzuelo, librándose con ello de sus diarias tentaciones.

Aún seguía ganando cuando entraron dos nuevos visitantes. Uno de ellos era el joven Hawley, recién concluidos sus estudios de derecho en Londres, y el otro, Fred Vincy, que en los últimos tiempos había pasado varias veladas en aquella antigua madriguera suya. El joven Hawley, consumado jugador de billar, trajo sangre nueva a la partida. Pero Fred Vincy, sorprendido al ver a Lydgate y muy asombrado de verlo apostar con animación, no llegó a acercarse, y se apartó del círculo formado en torno a la mesa.

Durante los últimos días Fred se había concedido un respiro. Llevaba seis meses trabajando con entusiasmo en tareas al aire libre bajo la dirección del señor Garth y a fuerza de perseverar casi había logrado superar los defectos de su caligrafía, aunque aquel ejercicio quizá resultaba un poco menos arduo por cuanto, a menudo, lo llevaba a cabo por la noche en casa de Caleb, bajo la mirada vigilante de Mary. Pero la señorita Garth había pasado los últimos quince días en la rectoría de Lowick con las señoras que vivían allí, aprovechando que el señor Farebrother se había trasladado a Middlemarch para poner en marcha algunas iniciativas parroquiales; y Fred, al no ocurrírsele nada más agradable que hacer, había terminado por volver a El Dragón Verde, en parte para jugar al billar y en parte para paladear el antiguo sabor de las conversaciones sobre caballos, deportes y otros temas varoniles en general, enfocados desde un punto de vista no del todo correcto. No había salido a cazar ni una vez en toda la temporada, carecía de caballo propio y se trasladaba fundamentalmente en la calesa del señor Garth, o a lomos de la tranquila jaca que Caleb estaba en condiciones de prestarle. Era un poco excesivo, empezaba a pensar Fred, que se le obligara a perseverar en el buen camino con más rigor que si hubiese sido clérigo. «Déjame decirte una cosa, Mary Garth… será un trabajo más duro estudiar agrimensura y aprender a levantar planos de lo que hubiera sido escribir sermones —le explicó Fred a su novia, deseoso de que apreciara lo que estaba haciendo por ella—; y en cuanto a Hércules y Teseo, no eran nada comparados conmigo. Pasaban buenos ratos y nunca aprendieron a escribir con caligrafía de contable». Y ahora, al desaparecer Mary durante una breve temporada, Fred, como cualquier otro perro robusto que no puede quitarse el collar, había arrancado la armella de la cadena y organizado una pequeña fuga, aunque sin intención de ir muy deprisa ni de llegar muy lejos. No había ninguna razón para que no jugara al billar, pero estaba decidido a no apostar. En cuanto a dinero, Fred acariciaba en aquel momento el heroico propósito de ahorrar casi íntegras las ochenta

libras que el señor Garth le había ofrecido y devolverlas, cosa que podía hacer sin dificultad renunciando a todo gasto inútil, puesto que tenía abundante provisión de ropa y la manutención y el alojamiento no le costaban nada. De esa manera podía, en un año, andar un gran trecho hacia la devolución de las noventa libras a las que la señora Garth había tenido que renunciar, desgraciadamente, en una época en que las necesitaba más que ahora. Hay que reconocer, sin embargo, que aquella noche, la quinta de sus recientes visitas a la sala de billar, Fred tenía, no en el bolsillo, pero sí en la cabeza, las diez libras que pensaba reservarse del salario de medio año (disfrutando de antemano con el placer de llevarle treinta a la señora Garth cuando ya era muy probable que Mary hubiese vuelto a casa); diez libras que tenía en la cabeza como una reserva de la que quizá arriesgara algo, si surgía la oportunidad de una buena apuesta. ¿Por qué? Pues porque, cuando las monedas de oro pasaban volando a su alrededor, ¿qué mal había en echar mano de unas cuantas? Nunca volvería a adentrarse mucho por aquella senda, pero a un hombre le gusta asegurarse, y a un hombre de mundo todavía más, de lo que es capaz de hacer en el campo de las diabluras si le apetece y de que, si renuncia a emborracharse, o a endeudarse, o a hablar con toda la desvergüenza que los estrechos límites de la capacidad humana le permiten, no se debe a que sea un bobalicón. Fred no llegaba a formular argumentos, que son una manera muy artificial e inexacta de representar el cosquilleante retorno de las viejas costumbres y de los caprichos de la sangre joven: pero aquella noche estaba presente en él un sentimiento profético de que cuando empezara a jugar también empezaría a apostar… de que disfrutaría bebiendo un poco de ponche y de que, en general, tenía que prepararse para lo «indispuesto» que se encontraría a la mañana siguiente. Muchas veces las acciones se inician con unos movimientos muy poco definibles.

Pero lo último que Fred podía esperar era encontrar a su cuñado Lydgate —a quien nunca había dejado de considerar un pedante que se sentía superior al resto de los mortales— presa de gran animación y apostando, como podría haberlo hecho él. Fred se conmovió más de lo que estaba en condiciones de explicar porque sabía, aunque de manera muy vaga, que Lydgate tenía deudas y que su padre se había negado a ayudarlo; y el resultado fue que su propia inclinación al juego se vio frenada de repente. Era una extraña inversión de actitudes: la fisonomía rubia y los ojos azules de Fred, de ordinario brillantes y despreocupados, siempre bien dispuestos para todo lo que encerrase una promesa de diversión, adoptaron sin esfuerzo un aire serio y casi avergonzado, como ante el espectáculo de algo indigno; mientras Lydgate, que tenía habitualmente un aire de fuerza serena y cierta actitud meditativa hasta en los momentos de mayor extraversión, actuaba, miraba y hablaba con esa apasionada forma de integrarse en la realidad circundante que nos hace pensar en un animal de ojos feroces y uñas retráctiles.

Lydgate, apostando por sus propias jugadas, había ganado dieciséis libras; pero la llegada del joven Hawley inclinó la balanza del otro lado. Sus tacazos eran de primera calidad y empezó a apostar contra los del joven médico, con lo que la tensión nerviosa de este último pasó de la simple confianza en los propios movimientos a tener que enfrentarse con las dudas de otra persona sobre su eficacia. El enfrentamiento era más emocionante que la confianza, pero también menos seguro. Lydgate siguió apostando a su propio juego, pero perdía con frecuencia. Continuó, de todos modos, porque su espíritu, hundido en la profunda sima del juego, estaba tan privado de horizontes como si fuera el más ignorante de los mirones allí presentes. Fred se dio cuenta de que Lydgate perdía deprisa y se encontró en la situación nueva para él de hurgarse el cerebro en busca de alguna estratagema con la que, sin resultar ofensivo, pudiera apartar a Lydgate del juego y sugerirle quizá una razón para abandonar el local. Vio que también otros observaban el extraño comportamiento de Lydgate y se le ocurrió que bastaría con tocarle el codo y hacer un breve aparte para sacarlo de su ensimismamiento. No fue capaz de pensar nada más brillante que la audaz improbabilidad de decir que quería ver a Rosy y que deseaba saber si se encontraba en casa aquella noche; y se disponía a llevar a cabo a la desesperada aquella estratagema ingenua, cuando se le acercó un camarero con una nota, diciendo que el señor Farebrother estaba en el piso bajo y deseaba hablar con él.

Fred se sorprendió y se sintió un poco incómodo pero, después de mandar recado de que bajaría inmediatamente, se dirigió con nuevo impulso a Lydgate, y le dijo: «¿Puedo hablar un momento contigo?» y en seguida hicieron un aparte.

—Farebrother acaba de enviarme una nota diciendo que quiere hablar conmigo. Está abajo. He pensado que quizá te gustaría saberlo, por si tienes algo que decirle.

Fred se había limitado a aprovechar aquel pretexto para hablar, porque no podía decir: «Estás perdiendo más de la cuenta y has conseguido que te mire todo el mundo; más vale que te vayas». Aunque la inspiración difícilmente le habría hecho mejor servicio. Lydgate no se había dado cuenta hasta entonces de la presencia de Fred, y su aparición repentina, anunciándole al señor Farebrother, tuvo el efecto de un golpe violento.

—No, no —respondió—; no tengo nada especial que decirle. Pero… el juego ha terminado… he de marcharme… solo he venido para ver a Bambridge.

—Bambridge está ahí, pero se ha peleado con alguien… No creo que se halle en condiciones de tratar de negocios. Acompáñame a ver a Farebrother. Supongo que se va a enfadar conmigo y tú puedes defenderme —dijo Fred, poniendo de manifiesto cierta habilidad diplomática.

Lydgate se sentía avergonzado, pero no quiso dejarlo traslucir negándose a ver a Farebrother; de manera que bajó también. Se limitaron a estrecharse la mano y a hablar de las heladas; y cuando los tres salieron a la calle, el vicario pareció muy dispuesto a despedirse de Lydgate. Estaba claro que deseaba hablar a solas con Fred y dijo, amablemente:

—Me he atrevido a molestarte, caballerete, porque tengo un asunto urgente que tratar contigo. Ven conmigo andando hasta St Botolph, ¿quieres?

Era una noche muy hermosa, con el cielo cuajado de estrellas, y el señor Farebrother propuso que dieran una vuelta para llegar a la vieja iglesia por la carretera de Londres. Lo que dijo a continuación fue:

—Creía que Lydgate no iba nunca a El Dragón Verde.

—También yo —dijo Fred—. Pero me ha explicado que había ido a ver a Bambridge.

—¿No estaba jugando, entonces?

Fred no tenía intención de dar más detalles, pero se vio obligado a decir:

—Sí, estaba jugando. Pero supongo que era una casualidad. Nunca lo había visto antes.

—Entonces, ¿tú has estado allí con frecuencia últimamente?

—Bueno, unas cinco o seis veces.

—Me parecía que tenías razones poderosas para dejar de ir.

—Sí. Usted las conoce perfectamente —dijo Fred, a quien no le gustaba verse catequizado de aquella manera—. Se lo confesé todo.

—Supongo que eso me autoriza a hablarte de ese asunto. Doy por sentado, ¿no es cierto?, que mantenemos una relación de sincera amistad: yo te he escuchado y tú estarás dispuesto a escucharme. Creo que me ha llegado el turno de hablar un poco de mí.

—Tengo con usted una deuda que nunca podré pagarle, señor Farebrother —dijo Fred, sin poder evitar que se le pasaran por la cabeza inquietantes conjeturas.

—No trataré de negar que estás en deuda conmigo hasta cierto punto. Pero voy a confesarte, Fred, que he tenido tentaciones de cambiar por completo de actitud, no diciéndote nada esta vez. Cuando alguien me comentó: «El joven Vincy vuelve a estar todas las noches en la mesa de billar… no soportará la brida mucho más tiempo», sentí la tentación de hacer lo contrario de lo que estoy haciendo… callarme la boca y esperar a que bajaras otra vez por la pendiente, primero apostando y después…

—No he hecho ninguna apuesta —se apresuró a decir Fred.

—Me alegra oírlo. Pero, como digo, mi primer impulso ha sido limitarme a mirar y ver cómo tomabas la dirección equivocada, cómo agotabas la paciencia de Garth y echabas a perder la mejor oportunidad de tu vida… esa oportunidad que has conseguido haciendo unos esfuerzos muy meritorios. Te puedes imaginar los sentimientos que han hecho surgir la tentación… estoy seguro de que los conoces. Estoy seguro de que sabes que la satisfacción de tus anhelos es un obstáculo para la consecución de los míos.

Hubo una pausa. El señor Farebrother parecía esperar a que se reconociera aquel hecho; y la emoción en el tono de su hermosa voz daba solemnidad a sus palabras. Pero ningún sentimiento podía acallar la alarma de Fred.

—No tengo intención de renunciar a ella —dijo, después de una breve vacilación; no era un caso en el que se pudiera fingir generosidad.

—Claro que no, si su afecto responde al tuyo. Pero las relaciones de este tipo, incluso cuando existen desde hace muchos años, son siempre susceptibles de cambio. No me resulta difícil imaginar que obrases de tal manera que se aflojaran los lazos de afecto con que Mary está unida a ti… no olvides que solo se ha ligado condicionalmente… y que en ese caso, otro hombre, que quizá se hace la ilusión de tener cierto ascendiente sobre ella, tal vez consiga ganar ese lugar privilegiado en su corazón y también el respeto que tú hayas dejado escapar. No me resulta difícil imaginar semejante resultado —repitió el señor Farebrother, haciendo mucho hincapié en sus palabras—. Existe un compañerismo ligado a la afinidad de gustos que puede desbancar incluso la más larga de las relaciones.

A Fred le pareció que, si el señor Farebrother dispusiera de pico y espolones en lugar de una lengua muy hábil, su sistema de ataque difícilmente podría ser más cruel. Tuvo la horrible seguridad de que detrás de todas aquellas afirmaciones hipotéticas existía la certeza de un cambio en los sentimientos de Mary.

—Sé, por supuesto, que todas mis esperanzas podrían venirse abajo —dijo el joven Vincy, con voz

angustiada—. Si Mary está empezando a comparar… —se interrumpió, no queriendo revelar todo lo que sentía, y luego dijo, con la ayuda de un poco de amargura—: pero yo creía que usted era amigo mío.

—Y lo soy; por eso estoy aquí. Aunque me he sentido muy inclinado a obrar de otra manera. Me he dicho: «Si hay alguna posibilidad de que ese jovencito se perjudique, ¿por qué tienes tú que mezclarte? ¿No vales tanto como él y no es cierto que los dieciséis años que le sacas, un período en el que lo has pasado bastante mal, te dan más derecho que a él a satisfacer tus anhelos? Si hay posibilidad de que se eche a perder, déjalo… quizá no puedas evitarlo de todas maneras… y recogerás en cambio los beneficios».

Hubo una pausa, en la que Fred tuvo el más desagradable de los escalofríos. ¿Qué venía después? Temía oír que Mary sabía algo… Le parecía que estaba escuchando una amenaza más que un aviso. Cuando el vicario volvió a hablar hubo un cambio en su voz, como una halagüeña transición a un tono mayor.

—Pero en una ocasión anterior mis intenciones fueron mejores y he terminado por perseverar en ellas. He pensado que la mejor manera de no ceder sería contarte todo lo que se me ha pasado por la cabeza. Y, ahora, ¿me entiendes? Quiero que la hagas feliz y que lo seas tú también y si existe posibilidad de que una palabra de advertencia por mi parte pueda evitar cualquier riesgo de que suceda lo contrario… pues bien: ya la he pronunciado.

Hubo una caída en la voz del vicario mientras decía las últimas palabras. Hizo una pausa. Estaban sobre una extensión de césped en el desvío de la carretera hacia St Botolph y el señor Farebrother tendió la mano, como para indicar que había terminado la conversación. Fred estaba conmovido de una manera desconocida para él. Alguien muy sensible a la contemplación de un noble acto ha dicho que este produce algo semejante a un estremecimiento regenerador y hace que uno se sienta dispuesto a empezar una nueva vida. En buena medida, ese fue el efecto de las palabras de Farebrother sobre Fred Vincy.

—Trataré de ser digno —replicó, interrumpiéndose antes de poder añadir: «De usted tanto como de ella». Mientras, el señor Farebrother había acumulado ánimos para decir algo más.

—No imagines que tengo motivos para creer que ha disminuido el afecto que Mary te profesa, Fred. Quédate tranquilo: si sigues por el buen camino todo lo demás se te dará por añadidura.

—Nunca olvidaré lo que ha hecho —respondió Fred—. No se me ocurre decir nada que merezca la pena… tan solo que trataré de que su bondad no se malgaste.

—Eso es suficiente. Buenas noches y que Dios te bendiga.

Así se separaron. Pero aún caminaron mucho los dos antes de recogerse. Gran parte de las cavilaciones de Fred podrían resumirse con estas palabras: «Desde luego hubiera sido estupendo para Mary casarse con Farebrother… pero si me quiere y soy un buen marido…».

Quizá las ideas del señor Farebrother puedan concentrarse en un solo encogimiento de hombros y unas breves palabras: «¡Y pensar en el papel que una mujercita puede representar en la vida de un hombre, hasta el punto de que renunciar a ella sea una buena imitación del heroísmo y conseguirla un excelente método de disciplina!».

Capítulo LXVII

Ahora hay guerra dentro del alma,
las Necesidades vociferantes apartan del trono sagrado
a los propósitos, y Orgullo, el gran visir,
acepta un pacto humilde, y desempeña el sumiso papel
de enviado y hábil apologista
de los rebeldes hambrientos.

Afortunadamente Lydgate había acabado perdiendo y se marchó de la sala de billar sin ánimos para lanzar otro asalto contra la suerte. Al día siguiente sintió incluso auténtica repugnancia de sí mismo cuando tuvo que pagar cuatro o cinco libras por encima de sus ganancias, al tiempo que perduraba en su retina la desagradable visión de la figura que había hecho no solo codeándose con la gente que frecuentaba El Dragón Verde, sino comportándose exactamente igual que ellos. Un filósofo que cede a la tentación de apostar dinero es difícilmente distinguible de una persona inculta en las mismas circunstancias: la diferencia se encontraría sobre todo en sus reflexiones posteriores, y las de Lydgate fueron muy desagradables. Su razón le hizo ver que aquel asunto podría haberse transformado en catástrofe mediante un insignificante cambio de escenario: en lugar de en unos billares bastaba con que hubiese entrado en una casa de juego, donde la fortuna se puede agarrar con las dos manos, en lugar de alzarla con el pulgar y el índice. Sin embargo, aunque la razón estrangulase el deseo de jugar, no desaparecía el sentimiento de que, disfrutando de la suerte en la necesaria proporción, hubiera preferido jugar a enfrentarse con la única alternativa posible.

Aquella alternativa era acudir al señor Bulstrode. Lydgate había presumido tantas veces ante sí y ante otros de su total independencia de Bulstrode, a cuyos planes se había prestado únicamente porque le permitían llevar a cabo sus propias ideas de trabajo profesional y de provecho público, y había apuntalado su orgullo con tanta constancia gracias al convencimiento de que estaba haciendo un buen uso social del banquero autoritario, cuyas opiniones consideraba despreciables y cuyos motivos le parecían con frecuencia una mezcla absurda de sentimientos contradictorios, que había llegado a crear serios obstáculos teóricos a la posibilidad de solicitar de él una considerable cantidad de dinero en beneficio propio.

Sin embargo, a principios de marzo sus asuntos se hallaban en esa situación en la que los hombres empiezan a decir que no sabían lo que hacían cuando prometieron y a darse cuenta de que el acto que consideraban imposible se está transformando en manifiestamente posible. Con el ingrato embargo de Dover a punto de convertirse en hecho consumado, con los ingresos procedentes de su clientela utilizados al instante para pagar deudas atrasadas y con la posibilidad, si lo peor llegaba a saberse, de que se le negara hasta el crédito para adquirir los suministros diarios y, sobre todo, con la visión del descontento irremediable de Rosamond obsesionándole día y noche, Lydgate empezó a ver que no le quedaba más remedio que pedir ayuda a alguien. Al principio consideró la posibilidad de escribir al señor Vincy; pero al preguntar a Rosamond descubrió, como ya sospechaba, que su mujer había solicitado dos veces la ayuda de su padre, la última después del desencanto con sir Godwin; y papá había dicho que Lydgate tenía que valerse solo. «Papá dijo que, con un mal año después de otro, cada vez comercia más con capital prestado; que ha tenido que renunciar a muchos caprichos y que no está en condiciones de retirar ni cien libras de los gastos de su familia. Dijo que “Lydgate se lo pida a Bulstrode; siempre han sido uña y carne”».

De hecho, el mismo Lydgate había llegado a la conclusión de que si tenía que acabar pidiendo un

préstamo sin interés, sus relaciones con Bulstrode, más que con ninguna otra persona, le permitirían formular una petición que no fuese puramente personal. Bulstrode había colaborado indirectamente a la exigüidad de sus ingresos profesionales y había tenido además mucha suerte al encontrar un socio médico para sus planes… pero ¿quién de nosotros, sometido a una dependencia como la que sujetaba a Lydgate, no ha tratado de creer que posee derechos que disminuyen la humillación de pedir? Era cierto que últimamente Bulstrode parecía interesarse menos por el hospital; pero también había empeorado su salud y mostraba signos de un profundo trastorno nervioso. En otros aspectos no daba la impresión de haber cambiado: siempre había sido muy cortés, aunque Lydgate sí había advertido en él una marcada frialdad en relación con su matrimonio y otras circunstancias personales suyas, frialdad que consideraba más de su gusto que cualquier familiaridad en su trato mutuo. Pero lo cierto es que Lydgate no acababa de decidirse, debilitada la costumbre de actuar de manera razonada por su repugnancia ante toda conclusión posible y los actos que reclamara. Al señor Bulstrode lo veía con frecuencia, pero no trató de utilizar ninguna de aquellas oportunidades para su propósito personal. En una ocasión pensó: «Escribiré una carta: la prefiero a cualquier conversación tortuosa»; pero en otra posterior cambió de idea: «No; si estuviera hablando con él, podría batirme en retirada tan pronto como aparecieran signos negativos».

De todos modos, los días pasaban y ni escribía la carta ni concertaba una entrevista. Al rehuir la humillación de adoptar una actitud de dependencia hacia Bulstrode, Lydgate empezó a reflexionar sobre otro paso todavía más ajeno a su antigua manera de ser. Empezó a considerar posible aceptar la pueril idea de Rosamond que con tanta frecuencia le había indignado: la de abandonar Middlemarch sin saber lo que vendría detrás de aquel primer paso. La pregunta surgía así: «¿Habría alguien que me comprara la clientela, incluso ahora, por lo poco que vale? En ese caso la subasta podría tener lugar como preparación necesaria para irnos a otro sitio».

En contra de aquel paso —que Lydgate seguía aún considerando una vergonzosa renuncia a su trabajo presente, un culpable apartarse de lo que era un cauce legítimo, y cada vez más ancho con el tiempo, de actividades dignas de elogio, para empezar de nuevo sin un punto de destino justificado— surgía el obstáculo de que el comprador, si es que llegaba a presentarse, podía no aparecer con la suficiente celeridad. ¿Y después? Rosamond en una casa pobre, aunque fuese en la gran metrópoli londinense o en la ciudad más distante, no encontraría los alicientes que la salvaran a ella de la melancolía y a él de los reproches por haberla hundido en ella. Porque, cuando un hombre empieza a escalar la montaña del éxito, puede, pese a su competencia profesional, pasarse una larga temporada subiendo. En el mundo británico no existe incompatibilidad entre la intuición científica y alquilar una casa amueblada: la incompatibilidad se da sobre todo entre la ambición científica y una esposa que pone objeciones a ese tipo de residencia.

Una oportunidad, sin embargo, vino a decidirlo en medio de sus vacilaciones. Recibió una nota del señor Bulstrode pidiéndole que fuera a verlo al banco. Últimamente se había manifestado en él una tendencia hipocondríaca que transformaba en posible signo de locura una falta de sueño que, en realidad, no era más que un leve empeoramiento de un síntoma dispéptico habitual. Bulstrode quería consultar a Lydgate sin tardanza aquella misma mañana, a pesar de que no tenía nada nuevo que añadir a lo que ya había contado anteriormente. El banquero escuchó con gran atención lo que Lydgate le dijo para disipar sus temores, aunque también en este caso se trataba de una repetición; pero el hecho de que Bulstrode recibiera su opinión médica con un sentimiento de alivio parecía hacer más fácil de lo que Lydgate había imaginado la tarea de exponerle una necesidad personal. El joven médico había insistido en la conveniencia de que el señor Bulstrode se despreocupara un tanto de los negocios.

—No es difícil ver que cualquier tensión mental, por ligera que sea, puede afectar a una constitución delicada —dijo Lydgate en el momento de la consulta en que las observaciones tienden a pasar de lo personal a lo general—, si reparamos en la profunda huella que la ansiedad deja durante algún tiempo incluso entre las personas jóvenes y vigorosas. Yo soy muy fuerte por naturaleza; y, sin embargo, me he visto muy debilitado últimamente por una acumulación de preocupaciones.

—Imagino que en una constitución tan debilitada como está ahora la mía ha de ser mayor la predisposición a caer víctima del cólera si esa enfermedad se presenta en nuestro distrito. Y desde su aparición cerca de Londres, no estará de más que importunemos al trono divino para que nos conceda su protección —dijo el señor Bulstrode, sin pretender pasar por alto la alusión de Lydgate, pero realmente preocupado por sus motivos personales de alarma.

—De todos modos usted ha hecho todo lo que está en su mano para que la ciudad tome las oportunas precauciones de carácter práctico y esa es la mejor manera de pedir protección de lo alto —dijo Lydgate, sintiendo una profunda aversión por las deficientes metáforas y la defectuosa lógica religiosa del banquero, aversión a la que contribuía su aparente sordera ante los problemas de los demás. Pero ya se había iniciado

el movimiento, largamente preparado, en busca de ayuda y no iba a dejar que se interrumpiera—. La ciudad ha trabajado bien en el asunto de la limpieza y en la búsqueda de medios materiales; y creo que, si el cólera llegara a presentarse, hasta nuestros enemigos reconocerían que las medidas tomadas en el hospital son de utilidad pública.

—Así es —dijo el señor Bulstrode con cierta frialdad—. En relación con lo que usted dice, señor Lydgate, sobre reducir mis ocupaciones, sepa que desde hace algún tiempo he estado madurando una idea en ese sentido… una idea de carácter muy preciso. Estoy considerando al menos una separación temporal de la administración de gran parte de mis asuntos de índole benéfica y comercial. También pienso cambiar de residencia por una temporada: probablemente cerraré o alquilaré Los Arbustos y me trasladaré a algún sitio cerca de la costa… informándome antes, como es lógico, acerca de su salubridad. ¿Le parece una medida recomendable?

—Sí, claro está —dijo Lydgate, recostándose en la silla, con mal disimulada impaciencia ante la mirada descolorida y ensimismada del banquero, tan preocupado por su salud.

—Desde hace algún tiempo vengo pensando que debería abordar esta cuestión con usted en relación a nuestro hospital —continuó Bulstrode—. Si llegan a darse las circunstancias que he indicado, tendré que renunciar a dirigirlo, y es contrario a mis convicciones sobre responsabilidad personal seguir destinando una cantidad importante a una institución sobre la que no puedo ejercer mi vigilancia ni tengo posibilidad de dirigir en cierta medida. En el caso, por tanto, de que mi decisión sea abandonar Middlemarch, retiraré del hospital nuevo cualquier ayuda excepto la que subsistirá por el hecho de mi contribución casi total a los gastos de su edificación y las importantes sumas que he dedicado después a su buen funcionamiento.

Lo que Lydgate pensó, cuando Bulstrode hizo una pausa, según tenía por costumbre, fue: «Quizá ha estado perdiendo mucho dinero». Aquella era la explicación más probable del pequeño discurso que había originado una alarmante disminución de sus esperanzas.

—La pérdida para el hospital difícilmente podrá repararse, mucho me temo —dijo el joven médico a modo de respuesta.

—Difícilmente —replicó Bulstrode, con el mismo tono pausado y suave—; a no ser que se introduzcan algunos cambios en su planteamiento. La única persona que casi con toda certeza está dispuesta a aumentar su contribución es la señora Casaubon. Me he entrevistado con ella para tratar este asunto y he llamado su atención, como voy a llamar ahora la de usted, sobre la conveniencia de lograr un apoyo más generalizado para el hospital nuevo mediante un cambio de sistema. —Otra pausa, pero esta vez Lydgate no dijo nada—. El cambio al que me refiero es una fusión con la enfermería, de manera que se considere el hospital nuevo un anexo especial de la institución más antigua, contando con el mismo consejo de dirección. También será necesario que se combine la dirección médica de los dos establecimientos. De esa forma, cualquier dificultad para el mantenimiento del hospital quedará superada; los intereses de la ciudad en materia de beneficencia dejarán de estar divididos.

El señor Bulstrode dejó de mirar el rostro de Lydgate para concentrarse en los botones de su chaqueta mientras hacía una nueva pausa.

—No hay duda de que es un buen plan para el mantenimiento del hospital —dijo Lydgate, con un dejo de ironía en la voz—. Pero no cabe esperar que me alegre de ello ahora mismo, puesto que uno de los primeros resultados será que los otros médicos perturbarán o interrumpirán mis métodos, aunque solo sea porque son los míos.

—Yo, por mi parte, como usted muy bien sabe, señor Lydgate, valoro mucho los procedimientos nuevos e independientes que ha empleado usted con tanta diligencia: el plan original, lo confieso, contaba con todo mi apoyo, sometiéndolo siempre a la divina voluntad. Pero, desde el momento en que indicaciones providenciales exigen de mí que renuncie, estoy dispuesto a hacerlo.

Bulstrode daba muestras de una exasperante habilidad en aquella conversación. Las metáforas deficientes y la lógica defectuosa en cuanto a las causas, que habían motivado el desprecio de su interlocutor, eran perfectamente compatibles con un modo de presentar los hechos que apenas dejaba hueco para que Lydgate desahogara su propia indignación y desencanto. Después de algunas reflexiones rápidas se limitó a preguntar:

—¿Qué ha dicho la señora Casaubon?

—Ese es precisamente el otro núcleo de información que quería transmitirle —dijo Bulstrode, que había preparado a conciencia su exposición pastoral—. Como usted sabe, se trata de una dama de gran generosidad y en posesión, me atrevería a decir, si no de grandes riquezas, sí, afortunadamente, de fondos de los que puede disponer libremente. La señora Casaubon me ha informado de que, pese a haber destinado la mayor parte de esos fondos a otros fines, está dispuesta a estudiar las posibilidades de sustituirme por

completo al frente del hospital. Pero desea que se le conceda un largo plazo para madurar sus ideas sobre este asunto y yo ya le he dicho que no hay ninguna necesidad de obrar con precipitación… que, de hecho, mis planes todavía no son definitivos.

Lydgate estaba dispuesto a decir: «Si la señora Casaubon ocupa el sitio de usted, saldríamos ganando en lugar de perdiendo». Pero había aún un peso en su alma que refrenó sinceridad tan jubilosa.

—Supongo, entonces, que debo abordar personalmente este asunto con la señora Casaubon —fue su respuesta.

—Precisamente; ese es el deseo que ha manifestado. Su decisión, ha dicho, dependerá en gran parte de lo que usted le diga. Pero no en el momento presente: se halla, según creo, a punto de emprender un viaje. Tengo aquí su carta —dijo el señor Bulstrode, sacándola y leyendo en voz alta—: «Salgo para Yorkshire con sir James y lady Chettam; y las conclusiones a las que llegue sobre ciertas tierras que he de ver allí quizá influyan sobre mis posibilidades de contribuir al mantenimiento del hospital». Por tanto, señor Lydgate, no hay necesidad de precipitarse en este asunto; pero era mi deseo informarle de antemano de lo que es posible que ocurra.

El señor Bulstrode guardó la carta y cambió de actitud, como dando por concluido el asunto. Lydgate, a quien las esperanzas renovadas sobre el hospital habían servido para que se planteara de nuevo los hechos que las envenenaban, comprendió que su petición de ayuda, si es que estaba dispuesto a hacerla, tenía que materializarse en aquel momento y con vigor.

—Le quedo muy agradecido por darme una información tan completa —dijo, con firmeza en el tono, pero con unas pausas entre las palabras que ponían de manifiesto el trabajo que le costaba hablar—. Lo más importante para mí es mi profesión y yo concluí hace algún tiempo que el hospital es el lugar donde utilizaría de la manera más provechosa mis conocimientos. Pero la utilización más provechosa no coincide siempre con el éxito económico. Todo lo que ha hecho impopular al hospital ha contribuido, junto con otras causas (creo que todas ellas conectadas con mi celo profesional), a hacerme impopular como médico. Mis enfermos, sobre todo, son los que no están en condiciones de pagarme. Los preferiría si yo, a mi vez, no tuviera que pagar a nadie. —Lydgate esperó un momento, pero Bulstrode solo hizo un gesto de asentimiento, sin dejar de mirarlo con gran fijeza, y el joven médico siguió hablando, con las mismas pausas entre palabras, como si estuviera mordiendo algo demasiado duro—. Me encuentro en dificultades monetarias y la única manera de salir de ellas es que alguien que tenga confianza en mí y en mi futuro me adelante una suma de dinero sin otra garantía. Era muy poca la fortuna que me quedaba al llegar aquí. Carezco de esperanzas de ayuda por parte de mi familia. Mis gastos, a consecuencia del matrimonio, han sido mucho mayores de lo que yo esperaba. El resultado en este momento es que necesitaría mil libras para salir del atolladero. Me refiero a evitar el riesgo de tener que vender todos mis bienes como garantía de las deudas más importantes… así como al pago de mis otras deudas… y a conservar un remanente para mantenernos un poco por delante de nuestros reducidos ingresos. Sé a ciencia cierta que mi suegro no está en condiciones de suministrarme esa cantidad. Tal es el motivo de que exponga mi situación al… a la otra persona que puede considerarse personalmente relacionada de algún modo con mi prosperidad o mi ruina.

A Lydgate le desagradaba profundamente oírse decir todo aquello. Pero ya había hablado, haciéndolo de manera inconfundiblemente directa. El señor Bulstrode respondió sin prisa, pero también sin vacilaciones.

—Me duele mucho, aunque, he de confesarlo, no me sorprende, la información que acaba usted de proporcionarme, señor Lydgate. Por mi parte, lamenté su enlace con la familia de mi cuñado, que siempre ha sido de costumbres pródigas y que ya ha tenido que recurrir a mí en más de una ocasión para conservar la posición que ahora ocupa. Mi consejo, señor Lydgate, sería que, en lugar de crearse nuevas obligaciones y proseguir una lucha de resultado incierto, se declarara usted en bancarrota.

—Eso no mejoraría mis posibilidades —dijo Lydgate, levantándose y hablando con amargura—, incluso aunque no fuera una cosa tan desagradable.

—Se trata sin duda de una dura prueba —dijo el señor Bulstrode—; pero las tribulaciones, mi querido amigo, son nuestro destino en este mundo y una expiación muy necesaria. Le recomiendo que sopese el consejo que le doy.

—Muchas gracias —respondió Lydgate sin saber muy bien lo que decía—. Ya le he entretenido más de lo necesario. Buenos días.

Capítulo LXVIII

¿Con qué ropa donairosa podrá engalanarse la virtud
si el vicio viste igual, y obtiene los mismos frutos?
¿Si error, si artimaña, si indiscreción
desempeñan papeles tan lucidos con fines igualmente laudables?
¿Quién controla enérgicamente
todo este enorme volumen de sucesos,
el mundo, el mapa universal de las acciones,
y demuestra en cada caso,
que el camino más directo obtiene aún los mejores resultados?
Porque, ¿no debería la sesuda y sabia experiencia
que mira además con los ojos del mundo entero
y recibe información de todas las épocas,
avanzar, sin guía, más segura que el engaño?

DANIEL, *Musophilus*

El cambio de plan y el desplazamiento de intereses que Bulstrode anunció o reveló en su conversación con Lydgate eran consecuencia de algunas duras experiencias del banquero desde la subasta de las posesiones del señor Larcher, cuando Raffles reconoció a Will Ladislaw y Bulstrode intentó sin éxito un acto de restitución con la esperanza de mover a la Divina Providencia para que impidiera otras dolorosas consecuencias.

La suposición de que Raffles, a no ser que lo detuviera la muerte, regresaría a Middlemarch antes de que transcurriera mucho tiempo, había quedado plenamente justificada. La víspera de Navidad se presentó en Los Arbustos; Bulstrode estaba en casa para recibirlo e impedir que se comunicara con el resto de la familia, pero no pudo evitar del todo que las circunstancias de la visita lo comprometieran a él y alarmaran a su mujer. Raffles se mostró mucho menos manejable que en anteriores ocasiones ya que su estado crónico de desasosiego mental y los efectos progresivos de su habitual intemperancia borraban muy pronto la impresión que dejaba en él lo que se le decía. Insistió en quedarse en la casa y Bulstrode, forzado a elegir entre dos males, comprendió que retenerlo era mejor alternativa que dejarlo ir a la ciudad. El banquero lo alojó en su propia habitación durante la velada y estuvo presente hasta dejarlo acostado, mientras Raffles se divertía con las molestias que causaba a aquel compañero en el pecado tan respetable y tan extraordinariamente próspero, diversión que él justificaba irónicamente como alegría por la satisfacción de su amigo al poder agasajar a un hombre que le había sido de gran utilidad y que aún no había recibido la recompensa merecida. No faltaba un cálculo muy sagaz bajo aquellas bromas ruidosas: la fría determinación de extraer una cifra importante de las arcas de Bulstrode como pago para librarse de aquella nueva aplicación del potro de tormento. Pero la astucia se le fue un poco de las manos.

De hecho, Bulstrode se torturaba más de lo que a Raffles le permitía imaginar su alma grosera. A Harriet, su mujer, se había limitado a decirle que se cuidaba de aquella desgraciada criatura, víctima del vicio, porque en caso contrario podía llegar incluso a destruirse; dejó traslucir, sin mentir directamente, que existía un lazo familiar que le obligaba a prestar aquellos cuidados y que se daban en Raffles signos de alienación mental que exigían precauciones especiales. Él personalmente se llevaría lejos de allí a tan desgraciada criatura a la mañana siguiente. Con sus explicaciones, Bulstrode tenía la impresión de proporcionar a su mujer la mejor información para transmitir a sus hijas y a los criados, y de justificar el

porqué de que nadie excepto él entrara en su habitación, ni siquiera para llevar comida y bebida al huésped. Pero vivió en un paroxismo de miedo ante la posibilidad de que alguien pudiese oír las atronadoras y directas referencias de Raffles a hechos del pasado o de que la señora Bulstrode cayera en la tentación de escuchar junto a la puerta. ¿Cómo podía evitarlo, excepto revelando su propio terror al abrir para comprobar si estaba allí? Es cierto que su mujer era una excelente persona, muy sincera y poco inclinada a utilizar un procedimiento rastrero para conseguir tan penosa información; pero el miedo era más fuerte que el cálculo de probabilidades.

Fue así como Raffles llevó demasiado lejos la tortura, produciendo un efecto que no entraba en sus planes. Al quedar patente que resultaba imposible manejarlo, Bulstrode comprendió que una actitud desafiante era el único recurso que le quedaba. Después de acostar a Raffles aquella noche, encargó que el coche cerrado estuviera listo para las siete y media de la mañana. A las seis ya llevaba mucho tiempo vestido y había pasado algunos de sus momentos de angustia en oración, explicando sus motivos para evitar los peores males si es que en algún caso había obrado con falsedad y había faltado a la verdad en presencia de Dios. Porque el fervor de Bulstrode para rehuir las mentiras directas no estaba en proporción al número de sus infracciones más indirectas, si bien muchas de ellas eran como los sutiles movimientos musculares que logran el fin que deseamos y nos hemos propuesto, aunque la conciencia no llegue a registrarlos, lo que nos lleva a imaginar que la divina omnisciencia solo ve con absoluta nitidez aquellas cosas de las cuales tenemos una clara percepción.

Bulstrode llevó su vela hasta la cabecera de la cama de Raffles, quien, al parecer, tenía un mal sueño. Permaneció en silencio, confiando en que la luz sirviera para despertarlo gradual y suavemente, temeroso de que se produjera algún ruido violento como consecuencia de una transición demasiado brusca. Llevaba un par de minutos o algo más contemplando los estremecimientos y escuchando los jadeos que sin duda acabarían despertando al que dormía, cuando Raffles, con un largo gemido medio ahogado, se incorporó y miró alrededor aterrado, tembloroso y sin aliento. Pero no hizo ningún otro ruido y Bulstrode, dejando la vela, esperó a que se recuperase.

Tuvo que pasar un cuarto de hora antes de que Bulstrode, con un frío tono autoritario que no había mostrado nunca, dijera:

—Vengo tan temprano a llamarle, señor Raffles, porque he encargado que el coche esté preparado para las siete y media y me propongo llevarlo yo mismo hasta Ilsely, donde podrá usted tomar el tren o aguardar la llegada de la diligencia. —Raffles se disponía a hablar, pero Bulstrode se le adelantó imperiosamente con estas palabras—: Haga el favor de guardar silencio y escuche lo que tengo que decirle. Me dispongo a proporcionarle dinero y también le haré entrega de una suma razonable de cuando en cuando, si me la pide por correo; pero si decidiera presentarse aquí de nuevo, si vuelve a Middlemarch, si usa la lengua de manera injuriosa para mí, tendrá que vivir de los frutos que le proporcione su maldad, pero sin ayuda mía. Nadie le pagará bien por lanzar mi nombre a los cuatro vientos: sé lo peor que puede usted hacer contra mí y me enfrentaré con las consecuencias si se atreve a imponerme de nuevo su presencia. Levántese y haga lo que le ordeno sin ruido, o mandaré a por un policía que lo saque de mi casa y así podrá usted llevar sus historias a todas las tabernas de la ciudad, pero no contará ni con una moneda mía de seis peniques para pagar la cerveza que consuma.

Bulstrode había hablado muy pocas veces en su vida de manera tan enérgica: llevaba meditando aquel discurso y sus probables efectos buena parte de la noche; y aunque no confiaba en librarse definitivamente de Raffles, había llegado a la conclusión de que era su mejor baza. Tuvo éxito por cuanto obtuvo al menos la sumisión de un hombre exhausto: en aquel momento su organismo destrozado por el alcohol se amedrentó ante la fría y resuelta actitud de Bulstrode y fue posible llevarlo hasta el coche sin contratiempos antes de que la familia del banquero bajase a desayunar. Los criados supusieron que se trataba de un pariente pobre y no les sorprendió que un hombre tan estricto como su señor, que llevaba la cabeza tan alta en el mundo, se avergonzara de semejante primo y quisiera librarse de él. El paseo de dieciséis kilómetros de Bulstrode con su aborrecido acompañante fue un comienzo bien melancólico del día de Navidad; pero para el final del trayecto Raffles había recobrado la presencia de ánimo y se marchó con una satisfacción a la que contribuyeron en no pequeña medida las cien libras que le dio el banquero. Diferentes motivos impulsaron a Bulstrode a mostrarse tan generoso, pero no quiso hacer un análisis detenido de todos ellos. Mientras contemplaba a Raffles durante su sueño intranquilo, sin duda había cruzado por su cabeza la idea de que aquel hombre se había desmejorado mucho desde que le hiciera entrega de las primeras doscientas libras.

Bulstrode tuvo buen cuidado de repetir la afirmación tajante sobre su propósito de no permitir que se jugara más con él; y trató de hacer entrar en la cabeza de Raffles la idea de que con su comportamiento

había demostrado que comprar su silencio entrañaba los mismos riesgos que desafiarlo abiertamente. Sin embargo, cuando Bulstrode regresó a su tranquila casa, libre ya de su presencia repulsiva, no trajo consigo seguridad alguna de haber conseguido algo más que un simple respiro. Era como si hubiera tenido un sueño repugnante y no fuese capaz de librarse ni de sus imágenes ni de su odioso acompañamiento de sensaciones… como si en todas las cosas agradables que rodeaban su vida un reptil peligroso hubiera dejado sus huellas viscosas.

¿Quién sabe qué parte de la vida interior de un hombre está formada por las ideas que esa persona cree que otros tienen de él, hasta que ese edificio de opiniones se ve amenazado de ruina?

Bulstrode se daba cuenta con mayor claridad del depósito de presentimientos inquietantes almacenado en la cabeza de su mujer, precisamente porque Harriet evitaba con el mayor cuidado hacer la menor alusión. Estaba acostumbrado a paladear todos los días el sabor de la autoridad suprema y el tributo de una deferencia sin reservas; y la certeza de que se le vigilaba o se le medía con la sospecha escondida de que tenía algún secreto vergonzoso, hacía que la voz se le quebrase cuando hablaba para edificar. Para hombres de temperamento propenso a la ansiedad como el de Bulstrode, prever es con frecuencia peor que ver; y su imaginación intensifica continuamente la angustia de una desgracia inminente. Sí, inminente; porque su desafío a Raffles no alejaría a aquel hombre… y aunque rezaba por conseguir tal resultado, apenas ponía esperanzas en ello: el oprobio era seguro. En vano se decía que, si Dios lo permitía, sería una manifestación de su voluntad, una posibilidad de expiación, una preparación, porque siempre acababa retrocediendo ante la quemadura imaginada, y llegaba a la conclusión que tenía que ser más conveniente para la gloria divina que él se viera libre del deshonor. El miedo lo empujó finalmente a hacer preparativos para abandonar Middlemarch. Si la terrible verdad tenía que llegar a saberse, se hallaría para entonces a una distancia más soportable del desprecio de sus antiguos vecinos; y en un nuevo escenario, donde su persona no despertase sentimientos tan intensos, su atormentador, si aún lo perseguía, resultaría menos formidable. No se le ocultaba que abandonar Middlemarch definitivamente sería muy doloroso para su mujer, y también por otras razones hubiera preferido Bulstrode quedarse donde había echado raíces. De aquí que, en un primer momento, hiciera sus preparativos de manera condicional, deseando dejar por todas partes puertas abiertas para el regreso después de una breve ausencia, en el caso de que una intervención favorable de la Providencia disipara sus temores. Estaba preparando la transferencia de la dirección del banco y la renuncia a todo control activo de otras empresas comerciales en la zona, dando como razón su salud delicada, pero sin excluir la reanudación futura de tales ocupaciones. Estas medidas le originarían nuevos desembolsos y cierta disminución de ingresos además de la que ya había sufrido en razón de la crisis general del comercio; y el hospital era el principal capítulo de gastos que podía legítimamente reducir.

Tales eran los motivos determinantes de su conversación con Lydgate. En aquel momento los preparativos del banquero se hallaban aún, en su mayor parte, en una fase que le permitiría dar marcha atrás si resultasen innecesarios. Continuamente retrasaba los últimos pasos; agobiado por sus temores, como muchos hombres en peligro de naufragar o de verse despedidos de su coche por caballos desbocados, Bulstrode tenía la impresión persistente de que algo impediría que sucediese lo peor, y de que echar a perder su vida a causa de un trasplante tardío podía ser un apresuramiento injustificado… sobre todo porque era difícil explicar satisfactoriamente a su mujer el proyecto de exiliarse por tiempo indefinido del único sitio donde a ella le gustaba vivir.

Entre los asuntos que Bulstrode tenía pendientes se hallaba la administración de la granja de Stone Court durante su ausencia; y en aquel asunto, como en todas las otras cuestiones relacionadas con casas o tierras que poseía en Middlemarch o en sus alrededores, el banquero había consultado a Caleb Garth. Quería, como cualquier otro propietario, contar con un agente más preocupado por los intereses de su cliente que por los suyos propios. Con relación a Stone Court, puesto que Bulstrode deseaba conservar el ganado y llegar a un arreglo que le permitiera, si así lo deseaba, reanudar su distracción favorita de supervisión, Caleb le aconsejó que no se contentara con un simple administrador, sino que alquilara la tierra, el ganado y los utensilios por años y que se quedara con una parte proporcional del producto.

—¿Puedo confiar en usted para que encuentre un arrendatario en esas condiciones, señor Garth? —dijo Bulstrode—. ¿Y me hará saber la suma anual que considera compensación adecuada por la administración de los asuntos que hemos examinado juntos?

—Lo pensaré —dijo Caleb, con su forma directa de hablar—. Veré cómo puedo resolverlo.

De no haber sido porque tenía que considerar el futuro de Fred Vincy, es probable que al señor Garth no le hubiera interesado acumular más obligaciones, dado que su mujer siempre temía que el trabajo le resultara excesivo a medida que pasaban los años. Pero al separarse de Bulstrode después de aquella conversación, se le ocurrió una idea muy tentadora a propósito del arrendamiento de Stone Court. ¿Qué

pasaría si Bulstrode aceptase colocar allí a Fred Vincy con la condición de que él, Caleb Garth, se hiciera responsable de la administración? Sería un excelente aprendizaje para Fred; sus ingresos serían modestos, pero le quedaría tiempo para mejorar sus conocimientos, ayudando a Caleb en otros negocios. Al llegar a casa expuso la idea a su mujer con tan evidente placer que ella no se atrevió a enfriar su entusiasmo expresando su temor siempre presente a que quisiera abarcar demasiado.

—El chico se pondría más contento que unas pascuas —dijo Caleb, echándose hacia atrás en el sillón, con expresión radiante— si pudiera decirle que ya estaba todo arreglado. ¡Date cuenta, Susan! Lleva pensando en ese sitio desde mucho antes de que se muriera el viejo Featherstone. Y sería la cosa más estupenda del mundo que, después de todo, viviera en la finca trabajando en ella a conciencia… por haberse dedicado a los negocios. Es bastante probable que Bulstrode le deje continuar y que Fred poco a poco pueda comprar el ganado. Su tío no tiene aún decidido, por lo que puedo ver, si se instalará definitivamente en algún otro sitio. Es la mejor idea que he tenido en toda mi vida. Y en ese caso los chicos podrían casarse sin esperar demasiado, Susan.

—Confío en que no le digas nada a Fred hasta que estés seguro de que Bulstrode no pone inconvenientes —dijo la señora Garth, en tono de suave admonición—. Y en cuanto al matrimonio, Caleb, nosotros, las personas mayores, no tenemos que contribuir a precipitarlo.

—No estoy seguro —dijo Caleb, torciendo la cabeza—. El matrimonio amansa mucho. Fred tendrá menos necesidad de mi bocado y de mi brida. De todas formas, no diré nada hasta que esté seguro del terreno que piso. Hablaré de nuevo con Bulstrode.

El señor Garth aprovechó la primera oportunidad que tuvo. Bulstrode no sentía gran afecto por su sobrino Fred Vincy, pero deseaba asegurarse los servicios de Caleb para muchos negocios diseminados por la zona, porque estaba convencido de que saldría perdiendo si no se confiaban a una administración escrupulosa. Por este motivo el banquero no puso la menor objeción a la propuesta del señor Garth; y existía también otra razón para que no lamentase dar su consentimiento a algo que beneficiaría a uno de los miembros de la familia Vincy. El motivo era que la señora Bulstrode, al enterarse de las deudas de Lydgate, había querido saber cuanto antes si su marido podía hacer algo por la pobre Rosamond y quedó muy afligida al saber por boca del banquero que los problemas de Lydgate no tenían fácil remedio y que el plan más juicioso era dejar que las cosas «siguieran su curso». La señora Bulstrode había dicho entonces por primera vez:

—En mi opinión siempre te muestras un poco duro con mi familia, Nicholas. Y estoy segura de que no tengo ninguna razón para repudiar a mis parientes. Quizá sean demasiado mundanos, pero nadie ha dicho nunca que no fuesen respetables.

—Mi querida Harriet —dijo el señor Bulstrode, perdiendo un poco la compostura al observar que los ojos de su mujer se habían empezado a llenar de lágrimas—, he proporcionado sumas importantes a tu hermano. No tengo por qué ocuparme además de sus hijos casados.

Parecía una objeción válida, y los reproches de la señora Bulstrode se transformaron en compasión por la pobre Rosamond, que solo estaba cosechando los frutos de la absurda educación recibida.

Al recordar aquel diálogo, el banquero comprendió que, cuando tuviese que hablar en detalle con Harriet de sus planes para abandonar Middlemarch, se alegraría de poder decirle que había llegado con Garth a un arreglo en beneficio de su sobrino Fred. De momento Bulstrode solo había anunciado a su mujer que pensaba cerrar Los Arbustos por espacio de unos meses y alquilar una casa en la costa oeste.

De aquí que el señor Garth obtuviera la confirmación que deseaba, es decir, que, en el caso de que el señor Bulstrode se ausentase de Middlemarch por un período indefinido, Fred Vincy pasaría a ser el arrendatario de Stone Court de acuerdo con las condiciones propuestas.

Caleb estaba tan entusiasmado con sus esperanzas por aquel «estupendo giro» que habían tomado las cosas, que, si su discreción no hubiera encontrado el refuerzo de cierta dosis de afectuosa amonestación por parte de su esposa, se lo habría contado todo a Mary, deseoso de «darle una alegría a la chica». Sin embargo, consiguió dominarse y ocultó a Fred ciertas visitas que estaba haciendo a Stone Court para examinar con más detenimiento la situación de la tierra y del ganado y llevar a cabo una tasación preliminar. Sin duda se mostraba más activo en aquellas visitas de lo que la probable proximidad de los acontecimientos exigía; pero le estimulaba la satisfacción paterna de ocupar la cabeza con aquel probable trozo de felicidad que tenía escondido como un regalo de cumpleaños con que sorprender a Fred y a Mary.

—Pero ¿y si todo el plan resultara no ser más que un castillo de naipes? —dijo la señora Garth.

—Bueno, bueno —replicó Caleb—; al menos no se derrumbará sobre la cabeza de nadie.

Capítulo LXIX

Si has oído un rumor, que muera contigo.

Eclesiástico

El señor Bulstrode estaba todavía sentado en su despacho del banco, hacia las tres de la tarde del mismo día en que habló allí con Lydgate, cuando entró un empleado para decirle que el caballo estaba listo y también que el señor Garth deseaba hablar con él.

—Claro que sí —dijo Bulstrode; y Caleb entró—. Haga el favor de sentarse, señor Garth —continuó el banquero, con su tono más afable—. Me alegro de que me haya encontrado aquí. Ya sé que para usted son preciosos hasta los minutos.

—Bah —dijo Caleb, amablemente, con un lento movimiento de cabeza hacia un lado, mientras se sentaba y dejaba el sombrero en el suelo. Bajó la vista, inclinándose hacia adelante y dejando que sus largas manos le colgaran entre las piernas, mientras movía cada uno de los dedos sucesivamente, como para que compartieran alguna idea que llenaba su amplia y serena frente.

El señor Bulstrode, como todas las personas que conocían a Caleb, estaba acostumbrado a su lentitud hasta que empezaba a hablar de cualquier tema que considerase importante, y suponía que iba a insistir quizá en la compra de algunas casas en Blindman's Court, con el fin de derribarlas, considerando que la pérdida en propiedades quedaría compensada por el nuevo flujo de aire y luz en aquel lugar. Gracias precisamente a propuestas como aquella, Caleb resultaba a veces molesto para sus clientes; pero de ordinario había encontrado a Bulstrode dispuesto a ir adelante con sus proyectos de mejora y los dos se llevaban bastante bien. Cuando habló de nuevo, sin embargo, fue para decir, con voz bastante baja:

—Acabo de regresar de Stone Court, señor Bulstrode.

—No habrá encontrado nada que esté mal, espero —se interesó el banquero—; yo mismo pasé ayer por allí. Abel ha sacado mucho partido de los corderos este año.

—Bueno, sí —dijo Caleb, alzando la vista con gesto serio—, hay algo que está mal… un forastero… muy enfermo, creo yo. Necesita un médico y he venido a hablarle de ello. Se llama Raffles.

El señor Garth advirtió el estremecimiento de Bulstrode. En aquel asunto el banquero había creído que sus temores lo tenían siempre demasiado en guardia para que cualquier noticia pudiera sorprenderlo; pero se había equivocado.

—¡Pobre hombre! —dijo con tono compasivo, aunque los labios le temblaban un poco—. ¿Sabe usted cómo ha llegado hasta allí?

—Lo llevé yo mismo —dijo Caleb, serenamente—, en mi calesa. Se había apeado de la diligencia y llegó andando un poco más allá de la curva, pasada la barrera de peaje, antes de que lo alcanzara. Recordaba haberme visto una vez con usted, en Stone Court, y me pidió que lo llevara. Me di cuenta de que estaba enfermo: me pareció que era lo que había que hacer, que hacía falta proporcionarle un techo. Y creo que ahora debería usted conseguir cuanto antes que vaya alguien a verlo. —Caleb recogió el sombrero del suelo mientras terminaba de hablar y se levantó lentamente del asiento.

—Desde luego —dijo Bulstrode, que pensaba a gran velocidad en aquel momento—. Quizá sea usted tan amable, señor Garth, de avisar al señor Lydgate al pasar por su casa… o ¡espere! es probable que en estos momentos se encuentre en el hospital. Mandaré ahora mismo a un criado a caballo con una nota y luego también iré yo a Stone Court.

Bulstrode escribió la nota muy deprisa y salió personalmente a dar el encargo a su criado. Cuando regresó, Caleb seguía de pie como antes, con una mano en el respaldo de la silla y el sombrero en la otra. En la cabeza de Bulstrode la idea dominante era: «Quizá Raffles solo haya hablado con Garth de su enfermedad. A Garth tal vez le sorprenda, como ya le pasó antes, que una persona con tan mal aspecto asegure tener una relación íntima conmigo; pero no sabe nada. Y sus relaciones conmigo son buenas… puedo serle útil».

Deseaba tener cuanto antes alguna confirmación de aquella esperanzadora conjetura, pero preguntar por lo que Raffles había dicho o hecho hubiera sido pregonar sus temores.

—Le quedo muy agradecido, señor Garth —dijo, con su habitual tono cortés—. Mi criado volverá dentro de unos minutos y entonces me pondré yo mismo en camino para ver qué se puede hacer por ese pobre desgraciado. ¿Quizá tenía usted algún otro asunto pendiente conmigo? Si es así, le ruego que se siente.

—Muchas gracias —dijo Caleb, con un leve gesto de la mano derecha para renunciar a la invitación—. Lo que quiero decirle, señor Bulstrode, es que debo pedirle que ponga sus asuntos en otras manos. Le estoy agradecido por la generosidad con que me ha tratado… en lo del arrendamiento de Stone Court y todo lo demás. Pero tengo que dejarlo.

Una certeza tan aguda como una puñalada atravesó el alma de Bulstrode.

—Se trata de una decisión muy repentina, señor Garth —fue todo lo que pudo decir en un primer momento.

—Lo sé —respondió Caleb—; pero es irrevocable. Tengo que dejarlo.

Hablaba con una firmeza llena de benevolencia y, sin embargo, el señor Garth vio que Bulstrode, con el rostro descolorido, parecía encogerse ante aquella bondad y desviaba los ojos. Caleb sentía una gran compasión, pero no habría podido recurrir a ningún pretexto para explicar su decisión, incluso aunque hubiera servido de algo.

—Se ha visto usted empujado a ello, según deduzco, por alguna calumnia contra mí lanzada por esa desgraciada criatura —dijo Bulstrode, deseoso ahora de saber lo más posible.

—Es cierto. No voy a negar que obro de acuerdo con lo que le he oído decir.

—Usted es un hombre honrado, señor Garth… un hombre, estoy convencido, que se siente responsable delante de Dios. No desearía cometer una injusticia mostrándose demasiado dispuesto a creer una calumnia —dijo Bulstrode, buscando con afán razonamientos que se adaptaran a la mentalidad de su interlocutor—. Esa es una razón absurda para renunciar a una asociación que, pienso yo, podría ser mutuamente beneficiosa.

—No cometería una injusticia contra ningún hombre si estuviera en mi mano evitarlo —dijo Caleb—; incluso aunque Dios hiciera la vista gorda. Confío en compadecerme siempre de mis prójimos. Pero, sinceramente… me veo obligado a creer que Raffles dice la verdad. Y no me sentiría satisfecho trabajando con usted o beneficiándome gracias a usted. Mi cabeza no lo aceptaría. Le ruego que se busque otro agente.

—Muy bien, señor Garth. Pero, al menos, tengo derecho a saber las maldades que le han contado. Tengo derecho a saber las sucias mentiras de las que me expongo a ser víctima —dijo Bulstrode, en quien, ante aquel hombre tranquilo que renunciaba a su interés personal, empezaba a mezclarse cierta dosis de cólera con la humillación del primer momento.

—No hace ninguna falta —dijo Caleb, moviendo una mano y torciendo levemente la cabeza, sin modificar el tono de voz, cuya intención era lastimar lo menos posible a aquel hombre tan digno de compasión—. Lo que me ha dicho nunca saldrá de mis labios, a no ser que algo que ahora desconozco me fuerce a hacerlo. Si usted llevó una vida deshonesta a fin de enriquecerse y para ello privó a otros de sus derechos con engaños, no dudo de que se arrepiente… Le gustaría cambiar el pasado y no puede hacerlo: eso debe de ser muy duro. —Caleb hizo una pausa y agitó la cabeza—. Yo no soy quién para amargarle aún más la vida.

—Pero lo hace… lo hace todo más difícil —dijo Bulstrode, dejando escapar sin quererlo una auténtica exclamación de súplica—, puesto que me vuelve la espalda.

—No tengo otro remedio —dijo Caleb, todavía con mayor amabilidad, alzando una mano—. Lo siento. Yo no lo juzgo a usted ni digo que sea un malvado y yo un hombre virtuoso. Dios no lo quiera. Yo no lo sé todo. Un hombre puede hacer el mal y levantarse después muy por encima de su pecado con el esfuerzo de su voluntad, aunque no consiga limpiar su vida. Ese es un castigo terrible. Si es eso lo que le sucede… lo siento mucho por usted. Eso es todo, señor Bulstrode. Todo lo demás está enterrado, por lo que a mis intenciones se refiere. Muy buenos días.

—Un momento, señor Garth —dijo Bulstrode, precipitadamente—. ¿Puedo contar entonces con su solemne promesa de que no le dirá a ningún ser vivo lo que… incluso aunque tenga algo de verdad… no es

más que un relato malicioso?

Aquello desató la cólera de Caleb, que dijo, indignado:

—¿Para qué se lo habría dicho, si no pensara hacerlo? No le tengo miedo, señor Bulstrode. Historias como esa no serán nunca una tentación para mi lengua.

—Perdóneme… estoy trastornado… soy víctima de ese hombre que vive sin ningún freno.

—¡Alto ahí!, tendrá usted que considerar si no ha colaborado a empeorar su situación, aprovechándose de sus vicios.

—Es usted injusto conmigo creyéndole sin reservas —dijo Bulstrode, abrumado, como si se tratara de una pesadilla, por su incapacidad para negar en redondo lo que Raffles pudiera haber dicho; y sintiendo, sin embargo, como una liberación que Garth no le exigiera una rotunda negativa.

—No —dijo Caleb, alzando una mano para disculparse—; estoy dispuesto a cambiar de opinión cuando tenga pruebas. No le privo a usted de ninguna oportunidad. En cuanto a hablar, considero un delito sacar a la luz el pecado de un hombre a no ser que deba hacerlo para salvar a un inocente. Esa es mi manera de pensar, señor Bulstrode, y lo que digo no tengo necesidad de jurarlo. Le deseo muy buenos días.

Unas horas más tarde, cuando ya estaba en casa, Caleb comentó con su mujer, como de pasada, que había tenido unas pequeñas diferencias con Bulstrode y que, en consecuencia, había renunciado a ocuparse de Stone Court, así como del resto de sus asuntos.

—Quería intervenir más de la cuenta, ¿no es eso? —dijo la señora Garth, imaginando que su marido se había sentido herido una vez más en su punto más sensible, porque no se le iba a permitir utilizar lo que a él le parecía mejor en materiales y métodos de trabajo.

—Humm —dijo Caleb, inclinando la cabeza y moviendo una mano gravemente. Y la señora Garth lo interpretó como una señal de que no tenía intención de volver a hablar sobre el tema.

En cuanto a Bulstrode, montó a caballo casi inmediatamente, poniéndose en camino de Stone Court, ansioso de llegar allí antes que Lydgate.

Tenía la cabeza llena de imágenes y de conjeturas que eran un lenguaje para sus esperanzas y temores, de la misma manera que los demás oímos tonos en las vibraciones que hacen temblar nuestro organismo. La profunda humillación sufrida al saber que Caleb estaba al tanto de su pasado y que rechazaba su patronazgo sufría altibajos y casi desaparecía ante el sentimiento de estar a salvo porque la elección de Raffles había recaído sobre Garth y no sobre otra persona. Le parecía una prueba de que la Providencia quería librarlo de peores consecuencias, porque quedaba expedito el camino para mantener el secreto. El hecho de que Raffles estuviera enfermo, de que hubiese sido trasladado a Stone Court y no a cualquier otro sitio… el corazón de Bulstrode palpitó muy deprisa ante las posibilidades que ofrecían aquellos acontecimientos. Si resultara que iba a quedar libre de todo peligro de deshonra… si pudiera saberse libre… su vida se consagraría a Dios más que nunca. Ofreció al cielo aquella promesa como si fuera a apresurar el remedio que tanto deseaba… trató de creer en el poder de aquella resolución devota… en su fuerza para acabar con Raffles. Sabía que debía decir: «Hágase tu voluntad», y lo repitió muchas veces. Pero no por ello desaparecía el intenso deseo de que la voluntad de Dios fuese dejar morir a aquel ser tan odiado.

Al llegar a Stone Court, sin embargo, el cambio operado en Raffles no pudo por menos de impresionarle, aunque, a excepción de su palidez y de su debilidad, el banquero habría considerado que se trataba sobre todo de una transformación mental. Su actitud fanfarrona y su deseo de atormentar al prójimo se habían convertido en un terror intenso aunque vago y parecía suplicar a Bulstrode que no se enfadara, porque se había quedado sin dinero… le habían robado… le habían quitado la mitad. Había acudido a Stone Court únicamente porque se encontraba enfermo y alguien le daba caza… alguien venía tras él: no le había dicho nada a nadie, había tenido la boca bien cerrada. Bulstrode, ignorante de la significación de tales síntomas, juzgó que aquella nueva impresionabilidad nerviosa le serviría para extraer de Raffles una confesión verdadera, y le acusó de mentir al asegurar que no había dicho nada a nadie, puesto que se lo había contado todo al hombre que lo recogió con su calesa, y lo llevó a Stone Court. Raffles lo negó con juramentos solemnes, porque era cierto que tenía cortadas las conexiones de la memoria y que había hecho su relato minucioso a Caleb Garth guiado por una serie de impulsos visionarios que luego volvieron a perderse en la oscuridad.

A Bulstrode se le encogió una vez más el corazón ante aquella señal de que no estaba en su mano sujetar a su antiguo subordinado, y de que ninguna promesa de Raffles servía para averiguar lo que el banquero deseaba conocer por encima de todo: si realmente Caleb Garth era la única persona de los alrededores a quien había revelado su secreto. El ama de llaves le explicó con toda normalidad que, después de marcharse el señor Garth, Raffles le había pedido cerveza y que después no dijo nada más, dando la impresión de estar muy enfermo. Por aquel lado podía concluirse que no se había producido revelación alguna. La señora Abel,

como los criados de Los Arbustos, pensaba que aquel hombre tan extraño pertenecía a la desagradable «parentela» que hay que considerar uno de los infortunios de los ricos. El ama de llaves había atribuido primero el parentesco al señor Rigg y, donde existe una cuantiosa herencia, la presencia y los zumbidos de semejantes moscones parecen suficientemente justificados. Cómo Raffles pudiera ser también pariente de Bulstrode no resultaba igual de claro, pero la señora Abel coincidió con su marido en el «vaya usted a saber», palabras sobre las que se podía reflexionar durante mucho tiempo, de manera que dio por zanjado el asunto con un movimiento de cabeza.

Lydgate tardó menos de una hora en llegar. Bulstrode habló con él antes de que entrara en el salón donde se encontraba Raffles.

—Le he llamado, señor Lydgate, para atender a un desventurado que fue empleado mío en otro tiempo, hace muchos años. Más tarde estuvo en América, y regresó, me temo, a una vida de ociosidad y de vicio. Como se halla en la indigencia, me siento obligado a ayudarlo. Está lejanamente emparentado con Rigg, el anterior propietario de Stone Court, y a eso obedece que encontrara el camino hasta aquí. Le creo gravemente enfermo: al parecer su cabeza también se ha visto afectada. Es mi intención hacer por él todo lo que esté en mi mano.

Lydgate, que tenía muy grabado el recuerdo de su última conversación con Bulstrode, no se sentía inclinado a intercambiar con él más palabras que las estrictamente necesarias y se limitó a asentir levemente con la cabeza a modo de respuesta; pero antes de entrar en la habitación se volvió maquinalmente y dijo:

—¿Cómo se llama el enfermo? —Porque aprender los nombres de sus pacientes es un talento tan importante para los médicos como para los políticos saber los de quienes los votan.

—Raffles, John Raffles —dijo Bulstrode, con la esperanza de que, sucediera lo que sucediese, Lydgate nunca llegara a saber nada más de él.

Después de examinar con detenimiento al enfermo y de reflexionar sobre sus síntomas, Lydgate ordenó que se le acostara y que permaneciera en la mayor quietud posible; luego pasó con Bulstrode a otra habitación.

—Se trata de un caso grave, por lo que deduzco —dijo el banquero, antes de que Lydgate empezara a hablar.

—No… y sí —respondió Lydgate, algo dubitativo—. Es difícil acertar con los posibles efectos de complicaciones de muchos años; pero el enfermo tiene una constitución muy robusta y no creo que este ataque sea fatal, aunque, por supuesto, el organismo se halla en una situación delicada. Se le debe vigilar y atender bien.

—Yo mismo me ocuparé de ello —dijo Bulstrode—. La señora Abel y su marido carecen de experiencia en casos como este. No me cuesta ningún trabajo pasar aquí la noche, si es usted tan amable de llevarle una nota a la señora Bulstrode.

—No considero que sea necesario —dijo Lydgate—. Parece bastante dócil y está asustado, aunque es posible que se vuelva menos manejable con el tiempo. Hay un hombre viviendo en la casa… ¿no es cierto?

—Más de una vez me he quedado aquí varias noches seguidas en busca de soledad —dijo Bulstrode, quitando importancia a su ofrecimiento—; estoy dispuesto a hacer lo mismo ahora. La señora Abel y su marido pueden relevarse o auxiliarme, si fuese necesario.

—Muy bien. En ese caso solo tengo que darle instrucciones a usted —dijo Lydgate, sin sorprenderse de que Bulstrode se comportara de manera un tanto peculiar.

—¿Opina usted, entonces, que hay esperanzas? —dijo Bulstrode cuando Lydgate le hubo explicado lo que tenía que hacer.

—A no ser que se presenten nuevas complicaciones, que por el momento no preveo… sí —respondió Lydgate—. Quizá empeore; pero no me sorprendería que se pusiera mejor en unos cuantos días, si mantenemos el tratamiento que he prescrito. Es necesario tener firmeza. Recuerde, si pide bebidas alcohólicas, sean las que sean, que no se le deben dar. En mi opinión, las personas en su estado mueren con más frecuencia por culpa del tratamiento que de la enfermedad. Pero siempre es posible que aparezcan nuevos síntomas. Volveré mañana por la mañana.

Después de esperar a que el banquero le entregara la nota para la señora Bulstrode, Lydgate no hizo conjeturas sobre la historia de Raffles durante el camino de vuelta, y repasó en cambio la controversia, renovada recientemente por la publicación en América de las abundantes experiencias del doctor Ware[138], sobre la mejor manera de tratar casos de alcoholismo como el de Raffles. Lydgate ya se había interesado por aquel asunto durante su estancia en el extranjero: se oponía por completo a la extendida costumbre de permitir el alcohol y de administrar insistentemente fuertes dosis de opio; y ya había llevado a la práctica

muchas veces aquel tratamiento con resultados favorables.

«Ese hombre está muy enfermo —pensó—; pero aún le queda capacidad de resistencia. Imagino que para Bulstrode supone una ocasión de mostrarse caritativo. Es curioso qué zonas de dureza y de ternura se mezclan en la manera de ser de los hombres. Bulstrode parece la persona menos comprensiva del mundo con algunas personas y, sin embargo, se ha tomado grandes molestias y ha gastado mucho dinero en actos de caridad. Supongo que tiene algún método para descubrir por quién se interesa el Cielo… y ha decidido que yo no entro en esa categoría».

Aquella veta de amargura procedía de una fuente muy abundante y fue ensanchándose en la corriente de sus pensamientos a medida que se acercaba a Lowick Gate. No había vuelto allí desde la primera entrevista con Bulstrode por la mañana, ya que el mensajero del banco lo había encontrado en el hospital; y por primera vez regresaba a su hogar sin la menor perspectiva de reunir dinero suficiente para librarse de la inminente desaparición de todo lo que hacía tolerable su vida de casado: todo lo que les evitaba a Rosamond y a él enfrentarse con el aislamiento total que los forzaría a reconocer el escaso consuelo que se podían prestar mutuamente. A Lydgate le resultaba más soportable saberse privado del afecto de su mujer que ver cómo su propia ternura no mitigaba en nada el dolor de Rosamond por la ausencia de otras cosas. Las heridas de su orgullo por las humillaciones pasadas y venideras eran muy dolorosas, pero apenas diferentes para él del sufrimiento más agudo que las dominaba: el de prever que Rosamond acabaría por considerarlo causa principal de su decepción y de su infelicidad. A Lydgate nunca le había gustado la provisionalidad de la pobreza, ni la había considerado una posibilidad real; ahora, sin embargo, empezaba a imaginar cómo dos criaturas que se amaran, y tuvieran un acervo común de ideas, podrían reírse de sus muebles desvencijados y de los cálculos para prever cuánto tiempo podrían seguir comiendo mantequilla y huevos. Pero participar en aquella poesía de lo humilde le pareció tan imposible como la despreocupación de la edad de oro; en la cabeza de la pobre Rosamond no había sitio suficiente para que el lujo pareciera cosa de poca importancia. Lydgate se apeó del caballo sintiéndose muy triste y entró en casa sin esperar otro consuelo que el de la cena, reflexionando sobre la conveniencia de hablar a Rosamond, antes de que terminara la velada, de su gestión con Bulstrode y de su fracaso. Era preciso no perder tiempo y prepararla para lo peor.

La cena tuvo que esperarle un buen rato antes de que estuviera en condiciones de tomársela. Porque al entrar halló que el agente de Dover ya había puesto un hombre en la casa, y cuando preguntó dónde estaba la señora Lydgate, le dijeron que se encontraba en su dormitorio. Subió y la encontró tumbada en la cama, pálida y silenciosa, sin responder, siquiera con el gesto, a las palabras o miradas de su marido. Lydgate se sentó en el lecho a su lado e inclinándose hacia ella, dijo con lo que era casi un grito de súplica:

—¡Perdóname por esta calamidad, mi pobre Rosamond! Sigamos queriéndonos a pesar de todo.

Ella lo miró en silencio, todavía con un gesto de desconcertada desesperación en el rostro, pero en seguida sus ojos azules empezaron a llenarse de lágrimas y le temblaron los labios. Aquel hombre tan recio había tenido que soportar demasiadas cosas en un solo día. Puso la cabeza junto a la de Rosamond y sollozó.

Tampoco impidió que su mujer se marchara a casa de sus padres muy de mañana al día siguiente… parecía que no había ya razones para que dejase de hacer lo que quisiera. Rosamond volvió al cabo de media hora y dijo que sus padres preferían que se quedara con ellos mientras se prolongara aquella situación tan desagradable. El señor Vincy había dicho que no podía hacer nada acerca de la deuda… si la pagaba, aparecerían media docena más. Sería mejor que Rosamond volviera a la casa paterna hasta que Lydgate estuviese en condiciones de proporcionarle un hogar en condiciones.

—¿Te parece mal, Tertius?

—Haz lo que quieras —dijo Lydgate—. Aunque la crisis no se producirá inmediatamente. No hay prisa.

—No me iré hasta mañana —dijo Rosamond—; tengo que hacer el equipaje.

—Yo esperaría un poco más… nunca se sabe lo que puede ocurrir —dijo Lydgate, con amarga ironía—. Quizá me rompa la cabeza y eso te facilite las cosas.

La desgracia de Lydgate, y también de Rosamond, era que su ternura por ella, al mismo tiempo impulso emocional y decisión meditada, se veía inevitablemente interrumpida por estallidos de indignación, unas veces irónicos y otras llenos de reproches. Rosamond los consideraba totalmente injustificados y la repugnancia que aquella severidad poco común despertaba en su interior aumentaba el peligro de hacerle inaceptable la ternura mucho más perseverante de su marido.

—Ya veo que no quieres que me vaya —dijo con helada mansedumbre—; ¿por qué no lo dices sin ponerte tan violento? Me quedaré hasta que me pidas que haga otra cosa.

Lydgate no dijo nada más pero siguió paseándose por la habitación. Se sentía magullado y exhausto y

bajo sus ojos había aparecido una línea oscura que Rosamond nunca había visto antes. Le desagradaba mirarlo. Tertius tenía una forma de tomarse las cosas que las hacía aún mucho peores para ella.

Capítulo LXX

Nuestros actos nos acompañan mucho tiempo,
y lo que hemos sido nos hace ser lo que somos.

La primera ocupación de Bulstrode después de que Lydgate abandonó Stone Court fue examinar los bolsillos de Raffles, donde estaba seguro de encontrar alguna cosa (como facturas de hotel de los sitios donde se había detenido) que confirmara o desmintiera su afirmación de que había venido directamente de Liverpool porque estaba enfermo y no tenía dinero. Llevaba varias facturas metidas en la cartera, pero todas con fecha anterior a las Navidades, a excepción de una, pagada aquella misma mañana. Esta última, arrugada, por una estancia de tres días en una posada de Bilkley, una ciudad por lo menos a sesenta kilómetros de Middlemarch, donde se celebraba una feria de caballos, la encontró Bulstrode en uno de los bolsillos de atrás, junto con un anuncio de la misma feria. La factura era elevada y, puesto que Raffles se había presentado sin equipaje, parecía probable que hubiera dejado allí su baúl como prenda, para no quedarse sin el importe del viaje; porque su monedero estaba vacío, y solo tenía un par de piezas de medio chelín y algunos peniques sueltos por los bolsillos.

Bulstrode respiró aliviado ante aquellos indicios de que Raffles no se había acercado a Middlemarch desde su memorable visita en Navidades. Tan lejos y entre personas desconocidas para Bulstrode, ¿qué satisfacción podía hallar la vena atormentadora y presuntuosa de Raffles contando viejas historias escandalosas sobre un banquero de Middlemarch? ¿Y qué daño podía hacerle aunque hablara? Ahora lo más importante era vigilarlo mientras existiera el menor peligro de nuevos delirios inteligibles, de que surgiera otra vez el inexplicable impulso de hablar que parecía haber funcionado en el caso de Caleb Garth; a Bulstrode le preocupaba mucho que pudiera suceder algo parecido con Lydgate. El banquero se quedó en vela toda la noche, si bien ordenó al ama de llaves que se acostara vestida, para que estuviese lista cuando él la llamara, alegando, para velar al enfermo, su propia tendencia al insomnio y su interés por cumplir las indicaciones del médico, indicaciones que respetó fielmente, aunque Raffles pedía aguardiente sin cesar y declaraba que se estaba hundiendo… que la tierra se le hundía bajo los pies. Se mostró inquieto y durmió poco, pero seguía acobardado y manejable. Después de que se le ofrecieran alimentos como indicara Lydgate, ofrecimiento que rechazó, y de que se le negaran otras cosas que solicitó, Raffles pareció concentrar todo su terror en Bulstrode, tratando, suplicante, de aplacar su indignación, de que no se vengara negándole el necesario sustento y declarando con solemnes juramentos que nunca había dicho a mortal alguno nada contra él. Bulstrode comprendió que no le gustaría siquiera que Lydgate oyera aquello; pero un signo aún más alarmante de las irregulares alternativas en su delirio fue que, con el amanecer, Raffles pareció imaginar de repente que había un médico en la habitación y se dirigió a él afirmando que Bulstrode quería matarlo de hambre para vengarse de él por haber contado lo que nunca había contado.

El ingénito sentido de autoridad de Bulstrode y su fuerza de voluntad le resultaron muy útiles. Aquel hombre de apariencia delicada, con trastornos de tipo nervioso, halló el necesario estímulo en las arduas circunstancias por las que atravesaba y, durante aquella difícil noche y la mañana siguiente, a pesar de su aspecto de cadáver animado, capaz de movimientos pero sin calor vital, mantenido a fuerza de fría impasibilidad, su cerebro trabajó mucho, y pensó en cómo protegerse y en cómo conseguir seguridad. Con independencia de las plegarias que pudiera elevar al cielo, con independencia de lo que en su interior se decía sobre la situación espiritual de aquel desgraciado y sobre la obligación en que se encontraba de someterse al castigo decretado por Dios en lugar de desear males a otros, a lo largo de todo aquel esfuerzo

para convencerse por medio de palabras, penetraban y se extendían con irresistible vigor las imágenes de los acontecimientos que él deseaba, imágenes a las que acompañaba su exculpación personal. Bulstrode no podía dejar de desear la muerte de Raffles y de ver en ella su propia liberación. ¿Qué significaba la desaparición de tan desdichada criatura? Era un pecador impenitente… pero ¿no eran impenitentes los delincuentes públicos? Sin embargo, la justicia decidía sobre su destino. Si la Providencia en este caso decretara su muerte, no habría pecado al contemplarla como una solución deseable… si él no se manchaba las manos apresurándola… si de manera escrupulosa hacía lo que estaba prescrito. Incluso aquí podía producirse un error: las prescripciones humanas eran cosas falibles; Lydgate había dicho que en ocasiones el tratamiento había acelerado la muerte del enfermo… y ¿por qué no su propio tratamiento? Pero, por supuesto, la intención era lo más importante en cuestiones de bien y de mal.

Y Bulstrode se propuso mantener su intención separada de sus deseos. Declaró en su interior que se proponía obedecer las órdenes recibidas. ¿Por qué tendría él que poner en duda la validez de aquellas órdenes? Era tan solo un truco muy común del deseo… que se aprovecha de cualquier escepticismo irrelevante, y que halla mayor espacio para actuar porque cuenta con la incertidumbre acerca de los efectos, con la oscuridad que toma la apariencia de ausencia de ley. De todas formas, Bulstrode obedeció las órdenes.

Su preocupación le llevaba a pensar de continuo en Lydgate, y el recuerdo de lo sucedido entre ellos la mañana del día anterior se presentaba acompañado de sentimientos que no habían aparecido durante la escena real. En aquel momento le había importado muy poco la penosa impresión que causaban en Lydgate las alteraciones sugeridas en el hospital o el descontento originado por lo que Bulstrode consideraba su justificada negativa ante una petición más bien exorbitante. El banquero revisó ahora la escena dándose cuenta de que, con toda probabilidad, Lydgate lo consideraba su enemigo, y de lo conveniente que sería, en cambio, congraciarse con él o, más bien, crear en el joven médico un fuerte sentimiento de dependencia personal. Lamentó no haber hecho un sacrificio económico que podía calificarse incluso de poco razonable. Porque en el caso de que los delirios de Raffles proporcionaran sospechas desagradables o, incluso, información verídica, Bulstrode habría sentido que contaba hasta cierto punto con el apoyo de Lydgate si este se hallaba en deuda con él por un favor tan importante. Pero quizá se arrepentía demasiado tarde.

Extraño y lastimoso conflicto en el alma de aquel hombre desdichado que durante años anheló ser mejor de lo que era; que logró disciplinar sus pasiones egoístas, vistiéndolas con ropajes severos, de manera que caminó con ellas como si fueran las devotas componentes de un coro, hasta que ahora, al surgir un motivo de terror, ya no podían seguir salmodiando, sino que proferían gritos vulgares queriendo ponerse a salvo.

Era casi mediodía cuando se presentó Lydgate: aunque quería haber llegado antes, no le había sido posible; y Bulstrode advirtió su aspecto de hombre exhausto. Sin embargo, el joven médico se enfrascó de inmediato en el examen del paciente y quiso saber con todo detalle lo que había ocurrido desde el día anterior. Raffles estaba peor, casi no aceptaba ningún alimento, pasaba en vela casi todo el tiempo y deliraba intranquilo; pero seguía sin mostrarse violento. A pesar de los temores de Bulstrode, Raffles apenas advirtió la presencia del médico y siguió hablando o murmurando de manera incoherente.

—¿Cómo lo encuentra? —preguntó Bulstrode, cuando estuvieron a solas.

—Los síntomas son más intensos.

—¿Es usted pesimista?

—No; sigo pensando que puede recuperarse. ¿Va a quedarse usted aquí? —dijo Lydgate, interrogando a Bulstrode con una brusquedad que incomodó al banquero, aunque en realidad no era resultado de conjetura ni sospecha alguna.

—Sí, creo que sí —respondió Bulstrode, dominándose y hablando con decisión—. Mi mujer está advertida sobre las razones que me retienen aquí. La señora Abel y su marido carecen de la suficiente experiencia para cargar con esta responsabilidad, que difícilmente puede incluirse entre los servicios que les atañen. Imagino que desea usted modificar sus instrucciones.

La nueva prescripción que Lydgate tenía que añadir era la administración de dosis de opio muy moderadas en el caso de que se prolongara el insomnio. El médico había tenido la precaución de llevar el medicamento en el bolsillo y dio minuciosas instrucciones a Bulstrode sobre la dosis y el momento en que debería suspenderse el tratamiento. Insistió en el riesgo de no detenerlas a tiempo; y repitió la orden de que no se le dieran bebidas alcohólicas.

—Por lo que veo de este caso —terminó—, la narcotización es lo único que me da miedo. Quizá capee el temporal incluso sin tomar mucho alimento. Todavía es un hombre robusto.

—Usted mismo parece enfermo, señor Lydgate, algo muy poco corriente, casi diría que sin precedentes desde que lo conozco —dijo Bulstrode, mostrando una solicitud tan distinta a su indiferencia del día

anterior, como su desinterés de aquel momento ante su propia fatiga era completamente diferente de su habitual ansiedad ególatra—. Temo que se enfrenta usted con dificultades graves.

—Así es, en efecto —dijo Lydgate, con brusquedad y el sombrero en la mano, dispuesto a irse.

—Algo nuevo, me temo —dijo Bulstrode, inquisitivamente—. Siéntese, por favor.

—No, muchas gracias —dijo Lydgate, con cierta altivez—. Ayer le expliqué cuál era el estado de mis asuntos. No hay nada que añadir, excepto que la orden de embargo sobre mi casa y mis muebles ya es un hecho. Cabe describir un gran número de dificultades con una frase muy breve. Le deseo muy buenos días.

—Espere, señor Lydgate, espere —dijo Bulstrode—; he estado considerando este asunto. Ayer su petición me sorprendió y la consideré superficialmente. La señora Bulstrode está preocupada por su sobrina y yo mismo lamentaría que se produjera un calamitoso cambio en su situación. Son muchas las peticiones que se me hacen, pero, pensándolo mejor, estimo justo incurrir en un pequeño sacrificio en lugar de abandonarlo a usted a su suerte. Dijo, creo recordar, que mil libras bastarían para superar por completo sus dificultades y permitirle recuperarse.

—Sí —dijo Lydgate, con un gran estallido de alegría interior que desbordaba cualquier otro sentimiento —; eso me permitiría saldar todas mis deudas, dejándome una pequeña cantidad sobrante. Podría dedicarme a economizar en nuestra manera de vivir. Y a la larga mi clientela llegaría a mejorar.

—Si espera usted un momento, señor Lydgate, le haré un talón por esa cantidad. Soy consciente de que la ayuda, para resultar eficaz en situaciones como la suya, ha de ser generosa.

Mientras Bulstrode escribía, Lydgate se volvió hacia la ventana, pensando en su casa… pensando en su vida, cuyo comienzo quedaba así a salvo del desastre, con sus buenos propósitos todavía intactos.

—Bastará con que me dé usted un recibo, señor Lydgate —dijo el banquero, avanzando hacia él con el cheque—. A la larga, espero que se encuentre usted en condiciones de devolverme el dinero poco a poco. Mientras tanto, me complace pensar que se verá usted libre de nuevas dificultades.

—Le quedo profundamente agradecido —dijo Lydgate—. Me ha devuelto usted la posibilidad de trabajar con alegría y con alguna esperanza de hacer el bien.

Al joven médico le pareció muy natural que Bulstrode hubiera reconsiderado su negativa: se correspondía con el lado munífico de su carácter. Pero mientras ponía a su caballo al trote largo para poder llegar antes a casa, dar a Rosamond la buena noticia y sacar dinero del banco para pagar al agente de Dover, cruzó por su cabeza, con una desagradable impresión, como un oscuro vuelo de mal augurio en el horizonte, la idea de lo mucho que él había cambiado en el espacio de pocos meses… la paradoja de que se sintiera exultante al adquirir una gran deuda de gratitud… de que se alegrara de haber recibido dinero de Bulstrode.

El banquero sintió que había dado un buen paso hacia el objetivo de eliminar una causa de intranquilidad, pero no por ello recobró la calma. No examinó los motivos inconfesables que le habían llevado a procurarse la buena voluntad de Lydgate, pero no por ello estuvieron menos activamente presentes, como un elemento irritante en la sangre. Un hombre jura y, sin embargo, no renuncia a los medios para incumplir su juramento. ¿Significa eso que se propone cometer perjurio? En absoluto; pero los deseos que van en esa dirección trabajan en él oscuramente, se abren camino hasta su imaginación y relajan sus músculos precisamente en los momentos en que se está repitiendo las razones que lo han llevado a jurar. Raffles, restableciéndose deprisa, recobrando el libre uso de sus odiosas facultades… ¿cómo podía Bulstrode desear aquello? Raffles muerto era la imagen que traía la liberación y Bulstrode, de manera indirecta, rezaba por aquel final, suplicando que, si fuera posible, el resto de sus días en la tierra se vieran libres de la amenaza de una ignominia que lo destruiría totalmente como instrumento al servicio de Dios. El pronóstico de Lydgate iba en contra de que se atendiera su ruego; y a medida que el día avanzaba, Bulstrode empezó a sentirse irritado ante la persistencia de la vida en el enfermo, a quien tan gustosamente habría visto hundirse en el silencio de la muerte: una voluntad imperiosa despertó impulsos asesinos contra aquella vida mostrenca, sobre la que la voluntad, por sí misma, no tenía poder alguno. El banquero se dijo que estaba fatigándose más de la cuenta; no velaría al enfermo aquella noche, sino que se haría sustituir por la señora Abel, quien, en caso de necesidad, podía llamar a su marido.

A las seis, después de que Raffles hubiese tenido apenas unos agitados e irregulares momentos de sueño, de los que despertaba con nuevas intranquilidades y gritos constantes de que se estaba hundiendo, Bulstrode empezó a administrarle opio de acuerdo con las indicaciones de Lydgate. Al cabo de media hora o algo más llamó a la señora Abel y le dijo que no se hallaba en condiciones de seguir velando al enfermo. No tenía más remedio que dejarlo a su cuidado; y procedió a repetir las instrucciones de Lydgate sobre las cantidades que se debían administrar. La señora Abel no había sabido hasta entonces nada de las prescripciones del médico; simplemente había preparado y llevado al cuarto del enfermo lo que Bulstrode le

pedía, obedeciendo sus indicaciones. Ahora empezó a preguntar qué otras cosas tenía que hacer además de administrar opio.

—Nada por el momento, excepto ofrecerle sopa o agua carbónica: puede usted venir a consultarme si necesita nuevas instrucciones. A no ser que se produzca algún cambio importante, no vendré a esta habitación durante el resto de la noche. Si es necesario, pídale a su marido que la ayude. No tengo más remedio que acostarme.

—Le hace mucha falta dormir, señor, estoy segura —dijo la señora Abel—, y tomar algo más reconfortante de lo que ha comido hasta ahora.

Bulstrode se separó del enfermo sin preocupación por lo que dijera en sus desvaríos, transformados ya en murmullos incoherentes, de los que difícilmente podrían sacarse conclusiones peligrosas. En cualquier caso tenía que arriesgarse a ello. Bajó primero al salón principal y empezó a considerar si no debería hacer que le ensillaran el caballo para volver a Middlemarch aprovechando la luz de la luna, y dejar de preocuparse por cualquier consecuencia terrenal. Luego deseó haberle suplicado a Lydgate que volviera otra vez aquella misma noche. Quizá expresara una opinión distinta y pensase que la situación de Raffles era menos esperanzadora. ¿Debía enviar a por Lydgate? Si Raffles estaba empeorando de verdad y muriéndose poco a poco, Bulstrode se podía ir a acostar y dormir dando gracias a la Providencia. Pero ¿era cierto que estaba peor? Lydgate podía venir y decir que seguía evolucionando de acuerdo con lo previsto y pronosticar que a la larga acabaría por dormir mejor y ponerse bien. ¿De qué servía llamar al médico? A Bulstrode le aterraba aquella posibilidad. Nada le impedía considerar el desenlace más estremecedor: que Raffles restablecido sería el mismo de antes, con la misma capacidad para atormentar, obligándole a llevarse a su mujer para que pasara el resto de su vida lejos de su familia y de su ciudad natal, con el corazón lleno de sospechas que la alejarían de él.

Después de hora y media de angustiosas reflexiones, sin otra luz que el resplandor del fuego en la chimenea, una idea repentina le hizo levantarse y encender la palmatoria que había bajado consigo del piso alto: no le había dicho a la señora Abel cuándo debían cesar las dosis de opio.

Cogió la palmatoria y permaneció inmóvil largo rato. Ya para entonces el ama de llaves podía haberle dado a Raffles más de lo prescrito por Lydgate. Pero era disculpable que él hubiera olvidado parte de una prescripción, dada su situación de extremada fatiga. Subió la escalera, con la palmatoria en la mano, sin saber si debía entrar directamente en su propia habitación y acostarse o regresar al cuarto del paciente y reparar su omisión. Se detuvo en el corredor, volviendo el rostro hacia la habitación de Raffles y le oyó gemir y murmurar. No dormía, por tanto. ¿Quién podía saber si no era mejor desobedecer la prescripción de Lydgate puesto que el enfermo seguía aún sin conciliar el sueño?

Bulstrode se dirigió a su propia habitación. Antes de que acabara de desvestirse, la señora Abel dio unos golpes en la puerta; el banquero la abrió unos centímetros, lo suficiente para oírla aunque hablara en voz baja.

—Por favor, señor, ¿no le podría dar un poco de aguardiente o algo parecido a ese pobre hombre? Siente que se hunde, y no quiere tragar nada… y con poco provecho si lo hiciera… excepto el opio. E insiste en que se está hundiendo hacia el centro de la tierra.

Para sorpresa del ama de llaves, el señor Bulstrode no contestó. Una pugna se había entablado en su interior.

—Creo que se morirá por falta de sustento si no hacemos algo. Cuando cuidé de mi pobre amo, el señor Robinson, tuve que darle oporto y aguardiente todo el tiempo y un vaso grande cada vez —añadió la señora Abel con un toque de reconvención en la voz.

Pero una vez más el señor Bulstrode no respondió inmediatamente y la señora Abel continuó:

—No es momento de ahorrar cuando una persona está a las puertas de la muerte, estoy segura de que usted no querría una cosa así, señor. De lo contrario le daría la botella de ron que guardamos para nosotros. Pero después de quedarse en vela y de haber hecho todo lo que estaba en su mano…

Al llegar aquí apareció una llave por la abertura de la puerta y el señor Bulstrode dijo roncamente:

—Esta es la llave del armario donde se guardan las bebidas. Allí encontrará aguardiente en abundancia.

Muy a primera hora, hacia las seis, el señor Bulstrode se levantó y pasó algún tiempo rezando. ¿Acaso alguien supone que las oraciones son necesariamente sinceras, que van necesariamente a la raíz de las acciones? La oración personal está hecha de palabras aunque sean inaudibles y las palabras son representativas: ¿quién es capaz de representarse a sí mismo tal como es, incluso en sus propias reflexiones? Bulstrode no había desenredado aún los impulsos confusos de las últimas veinticuatro horas.

Se detuvo a escuchar en el corredor y oyó una respiración estertórea con muchas dificultades. Luego salió al jardín y contempló la escarcha sobre la hierba y las tiernas hojas primaverales. Cuando volvió a

entrar en la casa, tuvo un sobresalto al ver a la señora Abel.

—¿Cómo está su enfermo…? Duerme, supongo —dijo, tratando de poner un toque de jovialidad en la voz.

—Duerme muy profundamente, señor —dijo la señora Abel—. Se fue calmando gradualmente entre las tres y las cuatro. ¿Será tan amable de ir a verlo un momento? He creído que no había ningún peligro en dejarlo solo. Mi marido ha salido al campo y la niña está cuidando de la cocina.

Bulstrode subió. Nada más entrar en el cuarto supo que Raffles no dormía con el sueño que trae la recuperación, sino con el de quien se hunde cada vez más en el abismo de la muerte.

Recorrió la habitación con la mirada y vio una botella con un poco de aguardiente y el pequeño frasco de opio casi vacío. Escondió el frasco y llevó la botella al piso bajo, donde volvió a guardarla bajo llave en el armario de las bebidas.

Mientras desayunaba meditó sobre la conveniencia de salir de inmediato a caballo hacia Middlemarch o esperar a que llegara Lydgate. Decidió esperar y dijo a la señora Abel que podía dedicarse a su trabajo habitual, porque él se quedaría en el dormitorio del enfermo.

Mientras estaba allí contemplando cómo el enemigo de su paz se hundía irrevocablemente en el silencio, se sintió más tranquilo que desde hacía muchos meses. Su conciencia encontraba sosiego bajo las alas acogedoras del secreto, que en aquel momento parecían precisamente las de un ángel enviado para socorrerlo. Sacó la agenda para revisar distintas anotaciones relativas a los planes, en parte realizados ya, de abandonar Middlemarch y consideró hasta dónde los llevaría adelante o los abandonaría, ahora que su ausencia iba a ser breve. Algunas medidas ahorrativas que aún le parecían deseables podrían llevarse a cabo sin dificultad gracias a su separación momentánea de los negocios, y seguía confiando en que la señora Casaubon aceptara una participación importante en los gastos del hospital. De esta manera fueron pasando los minutos, hasta que un cambio bastante marcado en la respiración estertórea de Raffles trasladó toda su atención al ocupante del lecho y le forzó a pensar en la vida que desaparecía y que en otro tiempo había estado subordinada a la suya, una vida que por entonces, afortunadamente, había sido lo bastante rastrera para actuar de acuerdo con sus deseos. Era su alegría de años pasados lo que le empujaba ahora a celebrar que aquella vida se estuviera acabando.

Y ¿quién podría decir que Raffles había muerto antes de tiempo? ¿Quién sabía qué era lo que podría haberlo salvado?

Lydgate llegó a las diez y media, a tiempo de presenciar los últimos estertores. Cuando entró en el cuarto, Bulstrode advirtió un repentino cambio de expresión en su rostro, no tanto de sorpresa como por imaginar que no había juzgado correctamente el estado del enfermo. El médico permaneció en silencio junto al lecho durante algún tiempo, con los ojos fijos en el moribundo, pero con esa discreta actividad de los rasgos faciales que pone de manifiesto la existencia de un debate interior.

—¿Cuándo se ha producido este cambio? —dijo, mirando a Bulstrode.

—No lo he velado yo esta noche —explicó el banquero—. Estaba agotado y lo dejé al cuidado de la señora Abel. Me ha dicho que se durmió profundamente entre las tres y las cuatro. Cuando yo entré aquí antes de las ocho ya estaba en una situación muy parecida.

Lydgate no hizo más preguntas y siguió contemplando a Raffles en silencio hasta que dijo:

—Todo ha terminado.

Aquella mañana el médico se encontraba en un estado de esperanza y libertad recobradas. Había salido a trabajar con toda su antigua animación, sintiéndose con la fuerza necesaria para sobrellevar todas las deficiencias de su vida matrimonial. Y se daba cuenta de que Bulstrode había sido su benefactor. Pero no estaba tranquilo con aquel caso. No esperaba que terminara como lo había hecho. No encontró, sin embargo, forma de hacer nuevas preguntas al banquero sin dar la impresión de insultarlo; y si interrogaba al ama de llaves… en cualquier caso, el enfermo había muerto. No parecía que sirviera de nada llegar a la conclusión de que la ignorancia o la imprudencia de alguien lo había matado. Y, después de todo, podía ser él quien se hubiera equivocado.

Bulstrode y Lydgate regresaron juntos a Middlemarch, hablando de muchas cosas, sobre todo del cólera y de las posibilidades de hacer aprobar la ley de la reforma electoral en la Cámara de los Lores y de la firme voluntad de las uniones políticas. No se dijo nada sobre Raffles, si se exceptúa que Bulstrode mencionó la necesidad de encontrarle una tumba en el cementerio de Lowick, observando que, por lo que se le alcanzaba, el pobre hombre no tenía parientes, a excepción de Rigg, quien, según declaraciones del difunto, no lo miraba con simpatía.

Ya de vuelta en su casa, Lydgate recibió la visita del señor Farebrother. El vicario no había estado en la ciudad el día anterior, pero la noticia de la orden de embargo contra la casa de su amigo había llegado a

Lowick a última hora de la tarde, transmitida por el señor Spicer, zapatero y sacristán, que lo había sabido por su hermano, el respetable campanero de Lowick Gate. Desde la noche en que Lydgate había bajado con Fred Vincy de la sala de billares, el señor Farebrother se había sentido bastante pesimista respecto al médico. Jugar en El Dragón Verde una o varias veces podía no tener importancia en otro hombre, pero en el caso de Lydgate era un signo más de que se estaba convirtiendo en otra persona. Empezaba a hacer cosas por las que antes manifestaba un desprecio casi excesivo. Cualquiera que fuese la relación de aquel cambio con ciertas dificultades matrimoniales, que algunas tontas habladurías habían hecho llegar a oídos del señor Farebrother, el vicario estaba seguro de que la causa eran sobre todo las deudas de las que cada vez se daban detalles más concretos, y empezaba a temer que cualquier idea de que Lydgate contara con recursos de otro tipo o con familiares en situación de ayudarlo careciera por completo de fundamento. El fracaso de su primer intento por ganarse la confianza de Lydgate le hacía sentirse muy poco inclinado a realizar un segundo; pero la noticia del embargo logró que el vicario superara ese recelo.

Lydgate acababa de despedirse de un enfermo pobre, por el que sentía mucho interés, y se adelantó a ofrecer la mano con una animación que sorprendió al señor Farebrother. ¿Podía ser aquello una orgullosa manera de rechazar toda manifestación de simpatía o intento de ayuda? Daba lo mismo; una y otra le serían ofrecidas.

—¿Qué tal está, Lydgate? Vengo a verlo porque he oído algo que me ha hecho preocuparme por usted —dijo el vicario, con el tono de un buen hermano, aunque sin el menor rastro de reproche en sus palabras. Para entonces ya estaban los dos sentados y Lydgate respondió al instante:

—Creo que sé a qué se refiere. ¿Ha oído usted que iban a embargarme la casa?

—Sí; ¿es cierto?

—Era cierto —dijo Lydgate, con aire desenvuelto, como si ya no le importara hablar de aquel asunto—. Pero ha pasado el peligro; la deuda está pagada. He superado mis dificultades: voy a quedar libre de deudas y en condiciones, espero, de empezar de nuevo con un plan de vida más ajustado a la realidad.

—Me alegra mucho oírlo —dijo el vicario, dejándose caer hacia atrás en la silla y hablando con la rapidez y el grave tono de voz que con frecuencia sigue a la desaparición de un peso que nos agobia—. Sus palabras me gustan más que todas las noticias del *Times*. Confieso que venía a verlo muy abatido.

—Le agradezco de verdad su interés —dijo Lydgate, cordialmente—. Aprecio más su amabilidad porque estoy muy contento. Es cierto que me he sentido aplastado. Me temo que a la larga descubriré que me siguen doliendo los cardenales —añadió, sonriendo tristemente—; pero ahora mi única sensación es la de haber salido del potro del tormento.

El señor Farebrother guardó silencio un instante y luego dijo con gran interés:

—Mi querido amigo, permítame hacerle una pregunta. Perdóneme si me tomo esa libertad.

—No creo que usted me pregunte nada que pueda ofenderme.

—En ese caso… lo considero necesario para sentirme del todo tranquilo… ¿no ha incurrido usted, para pagar sus deudas, en otra aún mayor que le produzca peores quebraderos de cabeza en el futuro?

—No —dijo Lydgate, ruborizándose levemente—. No hay razón para que no se lo cuente… puesto que es la verdad… La persona con la que estoy en deuda es Bulstrode. Me ha hecho un préstamo muy generoso… mil libras… y está dispuesto a esperar todo el tiempo que haga falta.

—Bien; una actitud generosa —dijo el señor Farebrother, forzándose a elogiar a un hombre por el que sentía aversión. Su delicadeza le impidió detenerse, incluso con el pensamiento, en el hecho de que siempre había instado a Lydgate a que evitara cualquier lazo personal con el banquero. Inmediatamente añadió—: Y es lógico que Bulstrode sienta interés por su bienestar, dado que usted ha trabajado con él de un modo que probablemente ha servido para reducir sus ingresos profesionales en lugar de aumentarlos. Me alegra mucho pensar que lo ha entendido así.

Lydgate se sintió muy incómodo ante aquellas amables suposiciones, porque definían con mayor nitidez la intranquilidad que había empezado a agitarse en su interior hacía tan solo unas horas, intranquilidad ligada a la hipótesis de que los motivos de Bulstrode para su repentina generosidad, tan poco tiempo después de haber manifestado la más fría indiferencia, fuesen exclusivamente egoístas. El joven médico dejó pasar las amables suposiciones del vicario. No podía contar la historia del préstamo, pero la tenía presente con mayor viveza que nunca, así como otro hecho que el vicario, con gran delicadeza, tampoco mencionaba: que aquella relación de endeudamiento personal con Bulstrode era lo que en otro tiempo él se había mostrado más decidido a evitar.

De manera que en lugar de contestar empezó a hablar de sus proyectadas economías y de cómo había llegado a ver su vida desde un punto de vista distinto.

—Instalaré una consulta privada —dijo—. Ahora ya sé que hice un esfuerzo equivocado. Y, si Rosamond

no pone inconvenientes, tomaré un aprendiz. No me gustan estas cosas, pero si uno las lleva a cabo escrupulosamente, no tienen en realidad nada de degradante. Para empezar, he sufrido una desolladura muy dolorosa; eso hará que los pequeños roces carezcan de importancia.

¡Pobre Lydgate! El «si Rosamond no pone inconvenientes», que se le había escapado de manera involuntaria como parte de su pensamiento, era un indicio significativo del yugo que soportaba. Pero el señor Farebrother, cuyas esperanzas se incorporaban con fuerza a la misma corriente que las de Lydgate, y que nada sabía sobre el médico que pudiera inspirarle presentimientos melancólicos, se despidió felicitándolo afectuosamente.

Capítulo LXXI

GRACIOSO (Pompeyo): … Era en el Racimo de Uvas, donde, sin duda, a vos os gusta sentaros, ¿no es cierto?
ESPUMA: Me gusta, porque es una sala abierta y buena para el invierno.
GRACIOSO: Muy bien entonces: espero que se digan verdades.

Medida por medida

Cinco días después de la muerte de Raffles, el señor Bambridge estaba sin hacer nada bajo el amplio arco que llevaba al patio del Dragón Verde. No era un hombre aficionado a la contemplación solitaria, pero acababa de salir del interior del edificio y cualquier persona que se colocara bajo el arco a primera hora de la tarde tenía tantas probabilidades de atraer compañía como una paloma cuando encuentra algo que merezca la pena picotear. En aquel caso no había nada material con que alimentarse, pero el ojo de la razón veía la posibilidad de sustento mental en forma de habladurías. El señor Hopkins, mercero de modales apacibles que tenía su establecimiento al otro lado de la calle, fue el primero en responder a aquella visión interior, por ser el más deseoso de un poco de conversación masculina, ya que sus clientes eran sobre todo mujeres. El señor Bambridge se mostró bastante brusco con el mercero, sabiendo como sabía que Hopkins tenía ganas de hablar con él, pero que él, por su parte, no iba a malgastar mucha conversación con Hopkins. Muy pronto, sin embargo, se había reunido ya un pequeño grupo de oyentes más distinguidos que, o eran personas que transitaban por la calle, o habían ido expresamente hasta allí para ver si pasaba algo en El Dragón Verde, por lo que el señor Bambridge decidió que merecía la pena contar muchas cosas notables sobre los hermosos sementales que había visto y sobre las compras que había hecho en un viaje al norte del que acababa de regresar. A los caballeros presentes les aseguró que, cuando estuvieran en condiciones de mostrarle algo que mejorase una yegua de pura sangre, de color bayo, de menos de cuatro años, que podían ver en Doncaster si se decidían a hacer el viaje, los recompensaría dejando que lo cazaran a tiros «desde allí hasta Hereford». Igualmente, una pareja de caballos negros a los que iba a empezar a domar y que le recordaban muchísimo a otro par que había vendido a Faulkner el año diecinueve por cien guineas y que Faulkner había vuelto a vender dos meses más tarde por ciento sesenta… Y a cualquier caballero que estuviera en condiciones de probar la falsedad de aquella afirmación se le ofrecía el privilegio de designar al señor Bambridge mediante un epíteto muy ofensivo hasta que se le secara la garganta de repetirlo tantas veces.

Cuando la conversación estaba ya así de animada, se presentó el señor Hawley. No era un hombre que comprometiera su dignidad malgastando el tiempo en El Dragón Verde, pero sucedió que pasaba por High Street y, al ver a Bambridge en el lado opuesto, cruzó la calle de unas cuantas zancadas para preguntarle si había cumplido su encargo, volviendo con un caballo de primera calidad para tirar de su calesa. Al señor Hawley se le pidió que esperase a ver el tordo elegido en Bilkley: si no satisfacía por completo sus deseos, Bambridge no era capaz de reconocer un caballo cuando lo veía, lo que a todas luces era una cosa del todo inconcebible. El señor Hawley, de espaldas a la calle, estaba concertando el día y la hora para ver al tordo y hacerle una prueba, cuando un jinete cruzó por allí a paso lento.

—¡Bulstrode! —dijeron dos o tres personas en voz baja al mismo tiempo; una de ellas, que era el mercero, anteponiendo respetuosamente el «señor» pero sin que ninguno recalcara más el apellido al colocarlo entre exclamaciones que si hubieran dicho: «¡La diligencia de Riverston!» al ver aparecer el vehículo a lo lejos. El señor Hawley se volvió para lanzar una mirada distraída a la espalda de Bulstrode, pero Bambridge, mientras lo iba siguiendo con los ojos, hizo una mueca sarcástica.

—¡Caramba! Eso me recuerda —empezó, bajando un poco la voz— que en Bilkley no recogí solo el caballo para su calesa, señor Hawley. Me he traído también toda una historia acerca de Bulstrode. ¿Sabe usted cómo llegó a amasar su fortuna? A cualquier caballero que desee un poco de información indiscreta, se la doy libre de cargos. Si todo el mundo recibiera lo que se merece, Bulstrode tendría que recitar sus oraciones en un penal australiano.

—¿Qué quiere usted decir? —dijo el señor Hawley, metiendo las manos en los bolsillos y adelantándose un poco hacia el interior del arco. Si Bulstrode resultaba ser un bribón, Frank Hawley tenía un alma profética.

—Lo he sabido por un antiguo compinche suyo. Les diré dónde lo encontré por vez primera —respondió Bambridge, con un repentino gesto del dedo índice—. Estaba en la subasta de Larcher, pero entonces no sabía nada de él… se me fue de entre los dedos… andaba buscando a Bulstrode, no hay duda. Me ha dicho que le puede sacar todo el dinero que quiera, que conoce todos sus secretos. De todos modos en Bilkley se fue de la lengua conmigo: bebe como una esponja. Estoy seguro de que no era su intención hacer de testigo de cargo, pero es uno de esos tipos a los que les gusta fanfarronear hasta que las fanfarronadas pueden más que ellos y acaban presumiendo de que un esparaván aumenta el valor de un caballo. Un hombre debería saber cuándo tiene que tirar de las riendas. —El señor Bambridge hizo aquella observación con una expresión de repugnancia, convencido de que sus propias fanfarronadas ponían de manifiesto un excelente sentido de lo vendible.

—¿Cómo se llama ese individuo? ¿Dónde se le puede encontrar? —dijo el señor Hawley.

—En cuanto adónde se le pueda encontrar, lo dejé bien ocupado en La Cabeza del Sarraceno; pero se apellida Raffles.

—¡Raffles! —exclamó el señor Hopkins—. Ayer mismo vendí las telas para su funeral. Se le enterró en Lowick. El señor Bulstrode lo acompañó al cementerio. Un funeral muy respetable.

Gran conmoción entre los presentes. El señor Bambridge lanzó una exclamación en la que «azufre» era la palabra más suave y el señor Hawley, frunciendo las cejas e inclinando la cabeza hacia adelante, preguntó:

—¿Cómo…? ¿Dónde ha muerto ese individuo?

—En Stone Court —respondió el mercero—. El ama de llaves dijo que era pariente del dueño. Llegó allí enfermo el viernes.

—¡Vaya! Fue el miércoles cuando tomamos una copa juntos —intervino Bambridge.

—¿Le atendió algún médico? —preguntó el señor Hawley.

—Sí, el señor Lydgate. El señor Bulstrode lo estuvo velando una noche. Murió en la mañana del tercer día.

—Vamos, Bambridge —dijo el señor Hawley con gran interés—. ¿Qué contaba de Bulstrode ese tal Raffles?

El grupo había crecido bastante, ya que la presencia del secretario del ayuntamiento era una garantía de que allí se estaba relatando algo digno de oírse; y el señor Bambridge contó su historia ante siete espectadores. Narró lo que ya conocemos, incluidos los hechos relativos a Will Ladislaw, con adición de algunas circunstancias y cierto color local: todo lo que Bulstrode había temido que llegara a saberse… y lo que esperaba haber enterrado con el cadáver de Raffles… el perturbador fantasma de su vida anterior del que, al pasar frente al arco del Dragón Verde, el banquero aún confiaba en que la Providencia le hubiera librado para siempre. Aún no se había confesado la realidad de sus maquinaciones para lograr tal fin; no había hecho más que aceptar lo que parecía un regalo del cielo. Era imposible probar que hubiese contribuido a precipitar la desaparición de Raffles.

Las habladurías sobre Bulstrode se extendieron por Middlemarch con la celeridad de un reguero de pólvora. El señor Hawley averiguó más detalles enviando a un pasante de su confianza a Stone Court con el pretexto de interesarse por el heno, pero en realidad para enterarse, a través de la señora Abel, de todo lo que pudiera saberse de Raffles y de su enfermedad. De esa manera se informó de que el señor Garth le había llevado hasta Stone Court en su calesa; y el señor Hawley, a continuación, buscó una oportunidad para ver a Caleb, yendo a su despacho para preguntarle si podría ocuparse de un arbitraje en el caso de que resultara necesario y después interrogándole como de pasada acerca de Raffles. Caleb no pronunció ninguna palabra injuriosa para Bulstrode, pero tuvo que admitir que había renunciado a ser su administrador en el transcurso de la última semana. El señor Hawley sacó sus conclusiones y, convencido de que Raffles le había contado su historia a Garth y de que Garth había roto con Bulstrode como consecuencia de ello, se lo contó así pocas horas más tarde al señor Toller. Sus manifestaciones fueron pasando de unos a otros hasta perder por completo la categoría de deducciones y considerarse que venían directamente de labios de Garth, de manera que incluso un historiador diligente podría haber llegado a la conclusión de que Caleb

había sido el principal divulgador de las fechorías de Bulstrode.

El señor Hawley no tardó en darse cuenta de que no existía asidero para la justicia en las revelaciones hechas por Raffles ni en las circunstancias de su muerte. Él mismo se trasladó a Lowick para examinar el registro y hablar de todo el asunto con el señor Farebrother, que se sorprendió tan poco como el abogado de que hubiera salido a la luz un feo secreto relacionado con Bulstrode, aunque siempre había tenido suficiente sentido de la justicia para impedir que su antipatía por él le llevara a sacar conclusiones precipitadas. Mientras hablaba, sin embargo, se iba produciendo en la cabeza del señor Farebrother otra asociación de ideas que anticipaba algo de lo que muy pronto se hablaría en voz alta en Middlemarch como un inevitable «dos más dos». Junto con las razones que explicaban el miedo de Bulstrode a las revelaciones de Raffles, surgió como un relámpago la idea de que ese temor estuviese relacionado con su generosidad hacia Lydgate; y, aunque rechazó la posibilidad de que su amigo hubiera aceptado el dinero como soborno, tuvo el presentimiento de que semejante concatenación de hechos podía tener un efecto muy perjudicial sobre su reputación. El vicario se dio cuenta de que el señor Hawley no sabía aún nada de la repentina desaparición de las deudas del médico y tuvo cuidado de evitar todos los caminos que pudieran desembocar en aquel asunto.

—Bien —dijo, respirando hondo, con el deseo de poner fin al interminable análisis de lo que podía haber sucedido, aunque legalmente nada pudiera probarse—, es una historia muy extraña. ¡De manera que nuestro hábil Ladislaw tiene una genealogía singular! Una señorita animosa y un patriota polaco con talento musical forman unas raíces bastante adecuadas en su caso, pero yo nunca hubiera sospechado la existencia de un injerto de prestamista judío. Sin embargo, nunca es posible saber de antemano qué resultados dará una mezcla. Algunos tipos de porquería sirven para aclarar.

—Es exactamente lo que yo habría imaginado —dijo el señor Hawley, montando a caballo—. Execrable sangre extranjera, judía, corsa y gitana.

—Ya sé que es una de sus ovejas negras, Hawley. Pero se trata en realidad de un individuo desinteresado, a quien preocupan muy poco las cosas de este mundo —dijo el señor Farebrother, sonriendo.

—¡Eso no son más que sus prejuicios *whig*, señor mío! —dijo el señor Hawley, que tenía la costumbre de afirmar, en tono de disculpa, que Farebrother era un tipo tan simpático y con tan buen corazón que se le podría confundir con un *tory*.

El señor Hawley regresó a su casa sin ver en los cuidados médicos que Raffles había recibido de Lydgate otra cosa que una prueba a favor de Bulstrode. Pero la noticia de que el joven médico, de repente, estaba en condiciones no solo de evitar el embargo de su casa, sino de pagar todas sus deudas en Middlemarch se extendió con gran rapidez, rodeada de conjeturas y comentarios que le dieron mayor cuerpo e ímpetu, y alcanzó muy pronto los oídos de otras personas además del señor Hawley, que no tardaron en ver una significativa relación entre tan súbita afluencia de dinero y el deseo de Bulstrode de sofocar el escándalo de sus relaciones con Raffles. Que el dinero procedía de Bulstrode se hubiera adivinado infaliblemente aun sin prueba directa de ello; porque ya con anterioridad se hablaba de que ni su suegro ni su propia familia estaban en condiciones de hacer nada por Lydgate, y la prueba directa la proporcionó no solo un empleado del banco, sino la misma señora Bulstrode de manera inocente, al mencionar el préstamo a la señora Plymdale, quien lo transmitió a su nuera, de soltera Sophy Toller, que habló de ello con todo el mundo. El asunto se consideró de carácter tan público y de tanto interés que se necesitaron cenas para alimentarlo y precisamente en aquel momento se hicieron y se aceptaron muchas invitaciones debido a la trascendencia del escándalo; esposas, viudas y señoritas solteras salieron a tomar el té con más frecuencia de lo habitual sin abandonar sus labores; y las reuniones en todos los locales públicos, desde El Dragón Verde hasta la taberna de la señora Dollop, alcanzaron una animación que no se hubiera conseguido con la cuestión de si los lores rechazarían o no la ley de la reforma electoral.

Porque apenas nadie dudaba ya de que en la raíz de la liberalidad de Bulstrode con Lydgate había algún motivo escandaloso. El señor Hawley, de hecho, como primera providencia, invitó a un grupo muy selecto, incluyendo a los dos doctores, junto con el señor Toller y el señor Wrench, para examinar de manera detenida la enfermedad de Raffles, repitiéndoles los detalles, reunidos a través de la señora Abel, del certificado de Lydgate, según el cual la muerte se había debido a delírium trémens; y todos los médicos, que seguían imperturbables las viejas sendas en cuanto concernía a aquella enfermedad, declararon que no veían nada en aquellos detalles que pudiera convertirse en motivo serio de sospecha. Pero las razones morales para dudar seguían existiendo: por un lado, los importantes motivos de Bulstrode para desear verse libre de Raffles y el hecho de que en aquel momento crítico hubiese ayudado a Lydgate a resolver un problema del que sin duda estaba al corriente desde hacía algún tiempo; y, por otro, la tendencia a sospechar que Bulstrode sería poco escrupuloso, junto con la falta de simpatías por Lydgate, que abonaba la

creencia de que se le podía sobornar tan fácilmente como a otros personajes tan altivos como faltos de recursos. Incluso aunque el dinero se le hubiese dado únicamente para que silenciara el escándalo en la vida anterior de Bulstrode, eso arrojaba una pésima luz sobre el médico, de quien se hablaba con desprecio desde hacía tiempo por haberse puesto al servicio del banquero con ánimo de obtener una situación de preponderancia y para desacreditar a sus colegas de más edad. De aquí que, a pesar del veredicto negativo sobre signos directos de culpabilidad en relación con la defunción en Stone Court, el selecto grupo de invitados del señor Hawley se despidiera con la sensación de que aquel asunto «olía muy mal».

El vago convencimiento acerca de una culpabilidad imprecisa que bastaba para dar pábulo a muchos movimientos de cabeza y a insinuaciones cáusticas incluso entre los más antiguos y respetados profesionales de la ciudad, tenía para el público en general la ventaja de que el misterio es mucho más atractivo que los hechos probados. Todo el mundo prefería hacer conjeturas a saber simplemente la verdad; porque las conjeturas llegaban muy pronto a tener más confianza en sí mismas que el conocimiento, y aceptaban con mucha más liberalidad afirmaciones antagónicas. Incluso el escándalo más definido, relativo a la vida anterior de Bulstrode, quedaba, para algunas personas, incorporado al núcleo del misterio, convertido en una cantidad de metal incandescente que se podía verter en el diálogo para que tomara las formas fantásticas que el cielo considerara convenientes.

Tal era el cariz fundamental de las ideas aceptadas por la señora Dollop, la fogosa propietaria de La Jarra de Cerveza en Slaughter Lane, que se veía obligada con frecuencia a rechazar el pragmatismo superficial de clientes dispuestos a creer que las noticias del mundo exterior que ellos aportaban tenían la misma fuerza que lo que «había surgido» en la cabeza de la posadera. La señora Dollop ignoraba cómo llegaba hasta allí, pero lo tenía delante igual que si estuviera escrito con tiza en los paneles de madera que había encima de la chimenea. «Como diría Bulstrode, sus entrañas eran tan negras que si sus cabellos conocieran los sentimientos de su corazón, se los arrancaría de raíz».

—Qué curioso —dijo el señor Limp, un zapatero reflexivo, de mirada tímida y voz demasiado aguda—. Leí en la *Trompeta* que eso fue lo que dijo el duque de Wellington cuando chaqueteó y apoyó a los católicos.

—Muy probable —dijo la señora Dollop—. Si ya lo dijo un sinvergüenza, más razón para que lo repita otro. Pero hipócrita sí que lo ha sido y, a pesar de hacer las cosas con altanería, como si en todo el país no hubiera un clérigo lo bastante bueno para él, no tuvo más remedio que pedir consejo a Pedro Botero y Pedro Botero ha podido más que él.

—Cierto, cierto; ese es un cómplice al que no se puede mandar al extranjero —dijo el señor Crabbe, el vidriero, que coleccionaba muchas noticias y se movía a tientas entre ellas—. Pero, por lo que se me alcanza, hay quien dice que Bulstrode quería marcharse antes de ahora, por temor a que lo descubrieran.

—Lo echarán de aquí, tanto si le gusta como si no —dijo el señor Dill, el barbero, que acababa de llegar —. Esta mañana afeité a Fletcher, el pasante de Hawley (tiene un dedo malo), y dice que están todos de acuerdo en desembarazarse de Bulstrode. El señor Thesiger se ha puesto contra él y quiere echarlo de la parroquia. Y algunos caballeros de esta ciudad aseguran que antes comerían con un presidiario que con él. «Y yo no podría estar más de acuerdo —dice Fletcher—; porque ¿qué hay más perjudicial para el estómago que un hombre que viene y se hace desagradable con su religión y proclama que los diez mandamientos no son bastante para él y mientras tanto es peor que la mitad de los hombres que están en la cárcel?». Así lo dijo el mismo Fletcher.

—Será, sin embargo, una mala cosa para la ciudad que salga de aquí la fortuna de Bulstrode —dijo el señor Limp, con voz trémula.

—Es cierto. Hay personas mejores que se gastan peor el dinero —dijo un tintorero de voz firme, cuyas manos de color carmesí no estaban en consonancia con su rostro bondadoso.

—Pero se va a quedar sin un céntimo, por lo que tengo entendido —replicó el vidriero—. ¿No dicen que hay alguien que se lo puede quitar todo? Por lo que yo deduzco, lo arruinarían si fuesen a los tribunales.

—¡Nada de eso! —exclamó el barbero, que se sentía un poco por encima de sus contertulios en la taberna de Dollop, pero no por ello le disgustaba frecuentarla—. Fletcher dice que no. Que, aunque prueben mil veces de quién era hijo el tal Ladislaw, no conseguirán más que si probaran que ha nacido por generación espontánea… no podrá recuperar ni un penique.

—¡Qué está usted diciendo! —intervino la señora Dollop, rebosante de indignación—. Le doy gracias al Señor que se llevó a mis hijos, si eso es lo único que la justicia puede hacer por los huérfanos. Según eso, no sirve de nada quién sea tu padre ni tu madre. Y en cuanto a escuchar lo que dice un abogado sin preguntar a otro… me maravilla en una persona de su inteligencia, señor Dill. Es bien sabido que siempre hay dos lados, si no son más; de lo contrario, ¿quién acudiría a la justicia, díganme ustedes? Me cuesta creer, con todas las vueltas y revueltas que tiene la justicia, que no sirva de nada probar de quién es hijo uno. Fletcher

podrá decir lo que quiera, pero yo le contesto: ¡a otro perro con ese hueso!

El señor Dill fingió reír admirativamente ante las palabras de la señora Dollop, dando a entender que era una mujer más que capaz de tenérselas tiesas con los abogados, ya que estaba dispuesto a dejarse ridiculizar todo lo que fuera necesario por una tabernera con quien tenía pendiente una cuenta nada despreciable.

—Si van a los tribunales, y si es verdad todo lo que dice la gente, hay otras cosas que mirar, además del dinero —dijo el vidriero—. Está ese pobre individuo muerto y enterrado: por lo que he sabido hubo un tiempo en que era mucho más caballero que Bulstrode.

—¡Mucho más caballero! De eso estoy segura —intervino la señora Dollop—; y bastante mejor parecido, por lo que me han dicho. Como le respondí al señor Baldwin, el recaudador de impuestos, que entró, se quedó de pie donde está usted y dijo: «Bulstrode consiguió todo el dinero que trajo a esta ciudad robando y estafando»; y yo le respondí: «No me dice usted nada nuevo, señor Baldwin; se me pone la carne de gallina solo de verlo desde que una vez vino a Slaughter Lane con el propósito de comprar la casa donde vivo; no es casualidad que las personas tengan color de masa sin cocer y miren como si quisieran ver lo que tienes dentro». Eso fue lo que dije y el señor Baldwin no me dejará mentir.

—Y tiene usted toda la razón —dijo el señor Crabbe—. Por lo que he podido saber, este Raffles, como lo llamaban, era el hombre más alegre y más saludable que se puede imaginar y un excelente contertulio… aunque ahora esté bien muerto y enterrado en el cementerio de Lowick; y por lo que tengo entendido, hay quien sabe más de lo que debiera sobre cómo llegó hasta allí.

—¡Pues claro que sí! —dijo la señora Dollop, con un dejo de desprecio ante la aparente vaguedad del señor Crabbe—. Cuando a un hombre se le engatusa para que vaya a una casa solitaria y los que pueden pagar hospitales y enfermeras a medio país prefieren quedarse velándolo día y noche y solo llaman a un médico del que se sabe que no respeta nada y que es pobre como una rata, que después aparece tan cargado de dinero como para pagar al señor Byles el carnicero la cuenta de más de un año… no hace falta que nadie venga a decirme que ahí han pasado más cosas de las que tiene previstas el libro de oraciones en sus ceremonias… No necesito hacer guiños, ni parpadear, ni quedarme pensando.

La señora Dollop miró a su alrededor con el aire de una patrona acostumbrada a dominar a sus contertulios. Hubo un coro de adhesiones de los más valerosos; pero el señor Limp, después de beber un trago, juntó las manos y las apretó con fuerza entre las rodillas, mirándolas con ojos empañados, como si el poder calórico de las palabras de la señora Dollop hubiera secado y anulado su inteligencia hasta que lograra reavivarla con la ingestión de nuevos líquidos.

—¿Y por qué no desentierran a ese hombre para que lo vea el *coroner*? —dijo el tintorero—. Se ha hecho muchísimas veces. Si ha habido juego sucio podrían descubrirlo.

—¡No lo crea usted, señor Jonas! —dijo la señora Dollop marcando mucho las palabras—. Conozco a los médicos. Son demasiado astutos para dejarse descubrir. Y ese doctor Lydgate, que era tan partidario de descuartizar a todo el mundo antes de que diera el último suspiro… está bastante claro para qué quería examinar las entrañas de personas respetables. Conoce medicinas, pueden estar seguros, que ni se huelen ni se ven, tanto antes como después de tragarlas. Vamos, yo misma he visto gotas recetadas por el doctor Gambit, el médico de nuestro club y una buena persona, que ha traído más niños al mundo que ningún otro de Middlemarch… Como decía, yo misma he visto gotas que igual podían estar en el vaso que no estar y, sin embargo, tenías un cólico al día siguiente. Así que dejo a su buen sentido que saquen conclusiones. ¡A mí no me lo cuenten! Lo único que digo es que fue una bendición que no nombraran a ese doctor Lydgate para nuestro club. Muchos hijos de vecino podrían haberlo lamentado.

Los distintos apartados de aquella discusión en la taberna de la señora Dollop, después de ser tema común en las conversaciones de todas las clases sociales de la ciudad, llegaron por un lado a la rectoría de Lowick y por otro a Tipton Grange, al mismo tiempo que alcanzaban, con todo lujo de detalles, a la familia Vincy y eran analizados con melancólicas referencias a la «pobre Harriet» por todos los amigos del señor Bulstrode, antes de que Lydgate supiera con claridad por qué la gente lo miraba de manera tan extraña y antes de que el mismo Bulstrode sospechara que sus secretos habían salido a la plaza pública. El banquero no estaba acostumbrado a mantener unas relaciones muy cordiales con sus vecinos y no podía, por tanto, echar de menos sus manifestaciones de simpatía; había estado además haciendo distintos viajes de negocios después de decidir que ya no necesitaba abandonar Middlemarch, sintiéndose por tanto capaz de tomar decisiones sobre asuntos que había dejado anteriormente en suspenso.

—Haremos un viaje a Cheltenham dentro de un mes o dos —le dijo a su mujer—. Esa ciudad tiene grandes ventajas espirituales además del aire y de las aguas, y seis semanas allí nos resultarán extraordinariamente beneficiosas.

Bulstrode creía de verdad en las ventajas espirituales y estaba decidido a que en adelante su vida fuese

más devota en razón de aquellos pecados recientes que él se presentaba a sí mismo como hipotéticos, rezando también hipotéticamente por su perdón: «Si he transgredido en esto».

En cuanto al hospital, evitaba decir nada nuevo a Lydgate, temiendo poner de manifiesto un cambio de planes demasiado repentino nada más producirse la muerte de Raffles. En lo más secreto de su alma, el banquero creía que Lydgate sospechaba que sus instrucciones habían sido desobedecidas a sabiendas y que al sospecharlo tenía que sospechar también la existencia de un motivo. Pero el médico no había llegado a saber la historia de Raffles, y Bulstrode deseaba no hacer nada que pudiera dar pábulo a sus imprecisas sospechas. En cuanto a la certeza de que un determinado método de tratamiento pudiera curar o matar, el mismo Lydgate daba de continuo razones contra semejante dogmatismo; no tenía derecho a hablar y sí, en cambio, todos los motivos imaginables para callarse. De aquí que Bulstrode se sintiera protegido por la Providencia. El único incidente que le hizo sobresaltarse fue un encuentro casual con Caleb Garth, quien, sin embargo, se quitó el sombrero para saludarlo con tranquila compostura.

Mientras tanto, entre las personas más representativas de la ciudad se iba creando un clima de total oposición al banquero.

Era necesario celebrar una reunión en el ayuntamiento con motivo de una cuestión sanitaria que se había convertido en asunto urgente, al declararse un caso de cólera en la ciudad. Desde que se aprobó precipitadamente un decreto del Parlamento por el que se autorizaba la percepción de tasas para medidas sanitarias, se había nombrado una comisión para la supervisión de tales medidas en Middlemarch, y *whigs* y *tories* se habían mostrado de acuerdo en que se hiciera una gran limpieza municipal, así como en otros preparativos. Ahora el problema que se planteaba era si debían adquirirse unos terrenos en las afueras de la ciudad para la creación de un cementerio, mediante la percepción de unas tasas, o por suscripción voluntaria. La reunión iba a estar abierta al público y se esperaba que todas las personas importantes de la ciudad se hallaran presentes.

El señor Bulstrode era miembro de la comisión y antes de las doce del mediodía se puso en camino desde el banco, con la intención de apoyar el plan de la suscripción voluntaria. Debido a las vacilaciones en sus proyectos, se había mantenido durante algún tiempo en segundo término y sentía que aquella mañana debía recuperar su antigua posición como hombre de acción e influencia en los asuntos públicos de la ciudad donde esperaba terminar sus días. Entre las diferentes personas que iban en la misma dirección, el banquero vio a Lydgate; se acercó él, hablaron sobre el objeto de la reunión y entraron juntos en el ayuntamiento.

Daba la impresión de que todas las personas importantes habían llegado antes que ellos. Pero todavía quedaban sitios libres cerca de la cabecera de una gran mesa central y los dos se dirigieron hacia allí. El señor Farebrother estaba enfrente, no lejos del señor Hawley; también habían acudido todos los profesionales de la medicina; el señor Thesiger ocupaba la presidencia y el señor Brooke, de Tipton Grange, se encontraba a su derecha.

Lydgate advirtió un peculiar intercambio de miradas cuando Bulstrode y él tomaron asiento.

Después de que el presidente declarara abierta la sesión, señalando las ventajas de adquirir por suscripción unos terrenos suficientemente amplios para convertirlos a la larga en el principal cementerio de Middlemarch, el señor Bulstrode, a cuya voz bastante aguda pero suave y a cuyo verbo fácil la ciudad estaba acostumbrada en asambleas de aquel tipo, se levantó y pidió permiso para expresar su opinión. Lydgate advirtió de nuevo el peculiar intercambio de miradas antes de que el señor Hawley se levantara y dijese con su voz firme y resonante:

—Señor presidente, solicito que antes de que nadie exprese su opinión sobre este asunto, se me permita hablar de algo que afecta al sentimiento público y que muchos de los caballeros aquí presentes consideran, como yo, que se debe tratar en primer lugar.

La manera de expresarse del señor Hawley, incluso cuando el decoro público refrenaba su «terrible lengua», resultaba formidable por su brusquedad y por lo seguro de sí mismo que estaba el abogado. El señor Thesiger accedió a su petición, el señor Bulstrode volvió a sentarse y el señor Hawley continuó:

—Lo que tengo que decir, señor presidente, no lo digo tan solo en nombre propio: hablo con el apoyo y por expreso deseo de ocho, por lo menos, de mis conciudadanos, todos ellos sentados a nuestro alrededor. Compartimos el convencimiento de que se le debe pedir al señor Bulstrode, y yo lo hago así en este momento, que dimita de todos los cargos públicos que ostenta no solo como contribuyente, sino como caballero entre caballeros. Existen prácticas y actos de los que, por diversas circunstancias, la justicia no puede ocuparse, aunque sean peores que muchas otras cosas legalmente punibles. Los hombres honrados y los caballeros, si no desean la compañía de las personas que perpetran tales actos, tienen que defenderse lo mejor que puedan, y eso es lo que yo y los amigos a los que cabría llamar mis clientes en este asunto

estamos decididos a hacer. No digo que el señor Bulstrode sea culpable de actos indignos, pero le conmino a que niegue y refute públicamente las escandalosas afirmaciones hechas contra él por un hombre ya muerto y que falleció en su casa: la afirmación de que se dedicó durante muchos años a prácticas inicuas y que obtuvo su fortuna por procedimientos deshonrosos; de lo contrario le exijo que renuncie a cargos que solo ha alcanzado por considerársele caballero entre caballeros.

Todos los ojos se habían vuelto hacia el señor Bulstrode, quien, desde la primera mención de su nombre, se sintió embargado por unas emociones casi demasiado violentas para que pudiera soportarlas su delicado organismo. Lydgate, que también estaba recibiendo un impacto semejante al de la trágica materialización de un impreciso augurio, advirtió, sin embargo, al contemplar la contracción dolorosa del rostro ceniciento de Bulstrode, que su propio impulso de odio y de resentimiento se veía frenado por el instinto del médico que piensa primero en procurar remedio o alivio al que sufre.

La rápida visión de que su vida era después de todo un fracaso, de que era un hombre deshonrado y de que tenía que temblar ante la mirada de las mismas personas ante las que asumía de ordinario la actitud de censor —la conciencia de que Dios lo había repudiado delante de los hombres dejándolo indefenso ante el triunfante desprecio de quienes se alegraban de encontrar justificación para su odio—, el sentimiento de la completa inutilidad de haber practicado el equívoco en el interior de su conciencia para disponer de la vida de su cómplice, equívoco que ahora se volvía venenosamente contra él con los colmillos bien afilados de una mentira descubierta; todo aquello se le pasó por la cabeza como el paroxismo de terror que no llega a matar y deja los oídos abiertos aún para la siguiente ola de abominación. La repentina sensación de haber caído después de creer que se hallaba a salvo no se abatió sobre la tosca sensibilidad de un delincuente, sino sobre la susceptibilidad nerviosa de un hombre cuya fuerza vital más profunda estaba ligada al sentimiento de superioridad y de preponderancia que las circunstancias de su existencia habían llegado a configurar para él.

Pero de aquella fuerza vital dependía la intensidad de la reacción. A través de toda su endeble contextura física corría una tenaz vena de ambiciosa voluntad de supervivencia que saltaba continuamente al exterior como una llama, disipando cualquier temor doctrinal y que ahora, incluso mientras resistía allí convertido en objeto de compasión para los misericordiosos, estaba ya empezando a agitarse y a brillar bajo la cenicienta palidez de su rostro. Antes de que hubieran salido las últimas palabras de la boca del señor Hawley, el banquero sintió que tenía que contestar y que su respuesta sería un contraataque. No se atrevía a levantarse y a decir: «No soy culpable, toda esa historia es falsa»… e incluso aunque se hubiera atrevido, le habría parecido, dado el vivo sentimiento que le dominaba de hallarse al descubierto, tan inútil como tratar de cubrir su desnudez con un trapo que se rasgara por el simple hecho de tocarlo.

Durante unos momentos el silencio fue total, mientras todos los presentes miraban a Bulstrode. El banquero siguió completamente inmóvil, apoyándose con fuerza contra el respaldo del asiento; no se atrevió a levantarse y cuando empezó a hablar se agarró con las manos a los dos lados de la silla. Su voz, sin embargo, resultó perfectamente audible, aunque más ronca que de costumbre, y pronunció las palabras con toda claridad, pero haciendo pausas entre cada frase como si le faltara el aliento. Volviéndose primero hacia el señor Thesiger y mirando luego al señor Hawley, dijo lo siguiente:

—Solicito de usted, como ministro cristiano, que no sancione medidas dictadas por el más virulento de los odios. Quienes me son hostiles se alegran de creer cualquier calumnia lanzada contra mí por un deslenguado, y sus conciencias se vuelven estrictas en detrimento mío. Dicen que las malas lenguas de las que se me quiere hacer víctima me acusan de actos contrarios a la ética —aquí la voz de Bulstrode se alzó adquiriendo un tono más cortante, hasta parecer un débil grito—, ¿quién será mi acusador? No los hombres cuyas vidas son anticristianas, más aún, escandalosas… no los hombres que usan instrumentos mezquinos para lograr sus propios fines… cuya profesión es un tejido de trapacerías… que gastan sus ingresos en placeres sensuales, mientras yo he consagrado los míos a promover fines elevados tanto para esta vida como para la venidera.

Después de la palabra «trapacerías» fue creciendo el ruido, mitad murmullos y mitad siseos, mientras cuatro personas se alzaban al mismo tiempo: el señor Hawley, el señor Toller, el señor Chichely y el señor Hackbutt; pero el estallido del señor Hawley fue instantáneo y se adelantó a los demás antes de que pudieran abrir la boca.

—Si se refiere a mí, señor mío, les ofrezco a usted y a todos los demás el examen de mi vida profesional. Cristiano o anticristiano, yo repudio su cristianismo hipócrita y palabrero; y en cuanto a la manera en que empleo mis ingresos, no figura entre mis principios mantener a ladrones ni privar a unos herederos del patrimonio que les corresponde para sostener la religión y entronizarme como virtuoso aguafiestas. No finjo delicadeza de conciencia… todavía no he descubierto que haga falta mucha delicadeza para medir las

acciones de usted, señor mío. Y de nuevo le conmino a que dé explicaciones convincentes sobre los escándalos en los que está envuelto, o de lo contrario le exijo que renuncie a puestos en los que, de todas formas, nos negamos a tenerlo por colega. Le repito que no queremos cooperar con una persona cuya reputación no esté limpia de las infames sombras arrojadas sobre ella no solo por la información acerca de su pasado, sino por sus acciones recientes.

—Permítame, señor Hawley —dijo el presidente; el señor Hawley, todavía encolerizado, inclinó la cabeza con gesto de impaciencia y volvió a sentarse con las manos metidas hasta el fondo de los bolsillos.

—Creo que no es deseable prolongar la presente discusión, señor Bulstrode —dijo el señor Thesiger, volviéndose hacia el pálido y tembloroso banquero—; he de reconocer que las palabras del señor Hawley expresan un sentimiento generalizado, según el cual está usted obligado por su profesión de fe cristiana a defenderse, si es posible, de cualquier imputación deshonrosa. Estoy dispuesto, por mi parte, a darle oportunidad cumplida para hacerlo y a escucharlo con imparcialidad. Pero debo decir que su actitud presente contradice los principios con los que usted ha tratado de identificarse en el pasado y cuyo honor yo me he comprometido a defender. En este momento le recomiendo, como ministro suyo y como persona deseosa de que recupere usted su anterior posición, que abandone la sala y evite poner nuevos obstáculos al desarrollo de la sesión.

Bulstrode, después de un momento de duda, recogió el sombrero del suelo y se puso en pie muy despacio, pero se agarró a la esquina de la silla dando tal sensación de estar a punto de desplomarse que Lydgate tuvo el convencimiento de que carecía de la fuerza suficiente para salir de allí sin ayuda. ¿Qué hacer? No podía permitir que una persona se derrumbara a su lado por falta de apoyo. El médico se levantó, dio el brazo a Bulstrode y de esa manera lo sacó de la habitación; aquel acto, sin embargo, que podría haber sido manifestación de delicado respeto y pura compasión, le resultó indescriptiblemente amargo. Parecía como si estuviera poniendo la firma a aquella asociación suya con Bulstrode que ahora veía con el significado que debían haberle atribuido otras personas. Tuvo la seguridad de que aquel hombre que se apoyaba temblorosamente en su brazo le había dado las mil libras como soborno, y de que el tratamiento de Raffles había sido alterado por motivos criminales. Las deducciones estaban ligadas de manera bien clara: la ciudad sabía del préstamo, creía que había sido un soborno y opinaba igualmente que él lo había recibido como tal.

El pobre Lydgate, con el corazón abrumado por el terrible peso de aquella revelación, se vio de todas formas moralmente obligado a llevar al señor Bulstrode hasta el banco, mandar a un hombre a por su coche y esperar después para acompañarlo a su casa.

Mientras tanto, al concluir la reunión, los asistentes, en diferentes grupos, se dedicaron a discutir con interés el asunto de Bulstrode… y de Lydgate.

El señor Brooke, que hasta entonces había oído solo versiones parciales de los hechos y estaba muy intranquilo pensando que «había ido un poco demasiado lejos» en el apoyo prestado a Bulstrode, se informó con todo detalle y experimentó cierta tristeza benévola al hablar con el señor Farebrother sobre la fea situación en que se había colocado Lydgate.

—Suba a mi coche —dijo el señor Brooke, al enterarse de que el vicario tenía intención de volver andando a Lowick—. Llevo su mismo camino: quiero hacer una visita a la señora Casaubon. Volvía anoche de Yorkshire. Se alegrará de verme, ya sabe usted.

De manera que se pusieron juntos en camino, el señor Brooke manifestando su bondadosa esperanza de que en realidad no hubiese nada censurable en el comportamiento de Lydgate, un joven del que, cuando se presentó con una carta de su tío sir Godwin, había comprendido en seguida que se hallaba muy por encima del nivel corriente. El señor Farebrother apenas habló: se sentía muy deprimido. Dada su aguda percepción de las flaquezas humanas, no podía estar seguro de que, bajo la presión de necesidades humillantes, Lydgate no hubiera cometido algún acto indigno.

Cuando el coche llegó al portón de Lowick Manor, Dorothea estaba fuera, en la avenida de grava, y se acercó a saludarlos.

—Hola, querida —dijo el señor Brooke—, venimos directamente de una reunión… de una reunión sobre problemas sanitarios, ¿sabes?

—¿Estaba presente el señor Lydgate? —dijo Dorothea, que parecía llena de salud y de animación y llevaba la cabeza descubierta bajo la brillante luz de abril—. Quiero verlo y tener con él una conversación muy importante sobre el hospital. Me he comprometido con el señor Bulstrode a hacerlo así.

—Lo siento —dijo el señor Brooke—, pero hemos oído malas noticias… muy malas noticias, ¿sabes?

Atravesaron el jardín hacia el portón que daba al patio de la iglesia, porque el señor Farebrother quería ir a la rectoría; y Dorothea oyó toda la historia.

Escuchó con gran interés e insistió en que le contaran por segunda vez todos los hechos y suposiciones relativos a Lydgate. Después de un breve silencio, haciendo una pausa ante el portón y dirigiéndose al señor Farebrother, dijo con gran energía:

—Usted no cree que el señor Lydgate sea culpable de nada deshonroso, ¿no es cierto? Yo no lo creeré nunca. ¡Debemos descubrir la verdad y reivindicarlo!

Libro octavo

Crepúsculo y aurora

Capítulo LXXII

> Las almas grandes son espejos dobles, que ofrecen de continuo
> un interminable panorama de cosas agradables por delante,
> y repiten las que quedaron atrás.

La generosidad impetuosa de Dorothea, que la hubiera llevado a procurar de inmediato la reivindicación de Lydgate para librarlo de toda sospecha de soborno, perdió buena parte de su fuerza cuando consideró las circunstancias del caso a la luz proporcionada por la experiencia del señor Farebrother.

—Es un asunto muy delicado —dijo el vicario—. ¿Cómo podemos empezar a hacer averiguaciones? Ha de ser de forma pública, poniendo a trabajar al magistrado y al *coroner*, o en privado, preguntando a Lydgate. En cuanto al primer procedimiento, carecemos de base sólida para actuar, de lo contrario Hawley mismo lo habría hecho ya; y en cuanto a abordar el asunto con Lydgate, confieso no atreverme. Temo que lo considerase un terrible insulto. Tengo cierta experiencia de lo difícil que es hablar con él de cuestiones personales. Y… deberíamos conocer de antemano la verdad acerca de su conducta, para estar muy seguros de lograr un buen resultado.

—Tengo la convicción de que no ha habido nada culpable en su comportamiento: creo que las personas son casi siempre mejores de lo que creen sus vecinos —dijo Dorothea.

Algunas de sus experiencias más intensas de los dos últimos años hacían que se opusiera con decisión a interpretar de manera desfavorable la conducta de otros; y por primera vez se sintió bastante descontenta con el señor Farebrother. Le disgustaba aquel cauteloso sopesar las consecuencias, en lugar de una fe ardiente en los esfuerzos encaminados a la justicia y a la misericordia, esfuerzos que triunfarían gracias a la intensidad del sentimiento que los empujaba. Dos días después, el vicario cenaba en Lowick Manor con el tío de Dorothea y los Chettam y, cuando aún no habían probado el postre pero los criados se hallaban ya fuera del comedor y el señor Brooke empezaba a dar cabezadas, la dueña de la casa volvió sobre el tema con renovada energía.

—El señor Lydgate comprenderá que, si sus amigos oyen una calumnia contra él, su primera preocupación sea reivindicarle. ¿Para qué vivimos, si no es para facilitarnos la vida unos a otros? No puedo sentirme indiferente ante las dificultades de un hombre que me aconsejó bien cuando tenía problemas graves y que me atendió durante mi enfermedad.

El tono y la actitud de Dorothea no eran más enérgicos que cuando ocupaba la cabecera de la mesa de su tío casi tres años antes y, sin embargo, su experiencia desde entonces le había dado mayor derecho a expresar sus opiniones con firmeza. Sir James tampoco era ya el pretendiente inseguro de sí mismo y acomodadizo; se había transformado en el cuñado preocupado, devotamente admirador de su hermana política, pero con el constante temor de que pudiera caer en otra nueva ilusión casi tan desastrosa como casarse con Casaubon. Sir James sonreía mucho menos; cuando decía «muy cierto», era para introducir muchas más veces que en los sumisos tiempos de su soltería una opinión disconforme; y Dorothea descubrió con sorpresa que tenía que hacerse el propósito de no tenerle miedo… sobre todo porque era de verdad su mejor amigo. En esta ocasión se mostró en desacuerdo con ella.

—Pero, Dorothea —dijo con tono de reconvención—, no puedes dedicarte a dirigir la vida de un hombre de esa manera. Lydgate tiene que saber… por lo menos sabrá muy pronto en qué situación se encuentra. Si puede demostrar su inocencia, lo hará. Tiene que actuar por su cuenta.

—Creo que sus amigos han de esperar a que surja una oportunidad —añadió el señor Farebrother—. Es

posible… yo me he sentido con frecuencia tan débil que imagino incluso a un hombre de inclinaciones honorables, como siempre he creído que es el señor Lydgate, sucumbiendo a la tentación de aceptar un dinero que se le ofreciera de manera más o menos indirecta como soborno para asegurar su silencio sobre hechos escandalosos ocurridos hace mucho tiempo. Digo que lo concibo, si se encontrara sometido a la presión de circunstancias muy difíciles… si esa persona se hubiera visto acosada como estoy seguro de que le ha sucedido a Lydgate. No creería nada peor de él, excepto en el caso de que se demostrara de forma irrefutable. Pero el terrible castigo que sigue a ciertos errores es que siempre resulta posible, para aquellos que así lo desean, interpretarlos como delitos: no existe otra prueba en favor de la persona en cuestión que su propia conciencia y sus afirmaciones.

—¡Qué crueldad tan grande! —dijo Dorothea, juntando las manos—. ¿Y no le gustaría ser la única persona que creyera en la inocencia de ese hombre, aunque el resto del mundo lo acusase? Además, existe su manera de ser, que habla por él.

—Pero, mi querida señora —dijo el señor Farebrother, sonriendo amablemente ante el ardor de Dorothea—, los caracteres no están esculpidos en mármol… no son cosas sólidas e inalterables. Viven y cambian y pueden enfermar, como sucede con los cuerpos.

—En ese caso también es posible rescatarlos y curarlos —dijo Dorothea—. No me asustaría pedirle al señor Lydgate que me dijera la verdad para poder ayudarlo. ¿Por qué tendría que darme miedo? Ahora que no voy a ser propietaria de esas tierras, James, podría hacer lo que el señor Bulstrode propuso y ocupar su sitio en la dirección del hospital; y tengo que hablar con el señor Lydgate para enterarme a fondo de cuáles son las posibilidades de hacer el bien sin cambiar los planes actuales. Es la mejor oportunidad del mundo para pedirle que se confíe a mí; y así estaría en condiciones de decirme cosas que pudieran aclarar lo sucedido. Entonces lo apoyaríamos y lo sacaríamos de sus apuros. La gente ensalza todo tipo de valentía, excepto la que podrían mostrar en favor de sus vecinos más próximos. —Los ojos de Dorothea tenían un húmedo brillo y los alterados tonos de su voz despertaron a su tío, que empezó a escuchar.

—Es cierto que una mujer puede aventurarse en esfuerzos de comprensión que difícilmente tendrían éxito si los intentáramos los varones —dijo el señor Farebrother, casi convertido por el ardor de Dorothea.

—Sin duda una mujer está obligada a ser prudente y a escuchar a quienes conocen el mundo mejor que ella —dijo sir James, frunciendo un poco el ceño—. Sea lo que fuere lo que termines haciendo, Dorothea, de momento deberías esperar y no ofrecerte a intervenir en este asunto de Bulstrode. No sabemos qué es lo que puede salir aún a la luz. Imagino que estará usted de acuerdo conmigo —terminó, mirando al señor Farebrother.

—Estoy de acuerdo en que sería mejor esperar —dijo este último.

—Sí, sí, querida —dijo el señor Brooke, sin saber del todo en qué punto se encontraba la discusión, pero incorporándose a ella con una contribución que era, en términos generales, apropiada—. Es fácil ir demasiado lejos, ya sabes. No debes permitir que te arrastren las ideas. Y en cuanto a tener prisa por invertir dinero en proyectos… No resulta nada bien, ¿sabes? Yo ya no sé lo que me ha sacado Garth con reparaciones, drenajes y todo lo demás. Me encuentro muy escaso de dinero entre unas cosas y otras. Tengo que decir basta. En cuanto a usted, Chettam, se está gastando una fortuna en esas vallas de roble alrededor de sus tierras.

Dorothea, sometiéndose de mala gana a aquellos consejos descorazonadores, se retiró con Celia a la biblioteca, que era su habitual sala de estar.

—Vamos, Dodo, tienes que escuchar lo que te dice James —arguyó su hermana—, de lo contrario te meterás en un lío. Siempre te ha sucedido y te seguirá sucediendo cada vez que te propongas salirte con la tuya. Y, después de todo lo que ha pasado, creo que es una bendición que tengas a James para que piense por ti. Te permite que hagas planes, pero impide que te engañen. Y esa es la ventaja de tener un hermano en lugar de un marido. Un marido te fiscalizaría.

—¡Como si yo necesitara un marido! —dijo Dorothea—. Solo quiero que no se pongan cortapisas a mis sentimientos a cada paso. —La señora Casaubon era aún lo bastante indisciplinada para estallar en lágrimas de indignación.

—Vamos, Dodo, vamos —dijo Celia, con voz todavía más gutural que de costumbre—, no haces más que contradecirte: primero una cosa y luego otra. Solías someterte al señor Casaubon de una manera vergonzosa; creo que hubieras dejado por completo de venir a verme si te lo hubiese pedido.

—Por supuesto que me sometía, porque era mi deber; era lo que me inspiraban mis sentimientos hacia él —dijo Dorothea, mirando a través del prisma de las lágrimas.

—Entonces, ¿por qué no piensas que es tu obligación someterte un poco a lo que James quiere? —dijo Celia, convencida de la fuerza de su argumento—. Porque solo desea cosas que son para tu bien. Y, por

supuesto, los hombres saben más de todo, excepto de las cosas que saben más las mujeres.

Dorothea se echó a reír y olvidó sus lágrimas.

—Bueno, me refiero a los bebés y todo lo demás —explicó Celia—. Yo no cedería ante James si supiera que estaba equivocado, como tú solías hacer con el señor Casaubon.

Capítulo LXXIII

> Apiadémonos del que está agobiado; esa calamidad errante
> puede visitarnos a ti y a mí.

Después de calmar la ansiedad de la señora Bulstrode, diciéndole que su marido se había sentido indispuesto en la reunión, pero que confiaba en su inmediato restablecimiento y que volvería al día siguiente, si no le llamaba antes, Lydgate fue directamente a su casa, montó a caballo y se alejó cinco kilómetros de la ciudad para ponerse así fuera del alcance de todos.

Notaba que se estaba volviendo tan violento y poco razonable como si hubiera enloquecido bajo el dolor de repetidas picaduras: se hallaba dispuesto a maldecir el día en que llegó a Middlemarch. Todo lo que le había sucedido desde entonces parecía una simple preparación para aquella terrible calamidad, que había caído como una enfermedad vergonzosa sobre sus nobles ambiciones y que, incluso ante personas con criterios muy poco exigentes, dañaría su reputación de manera irremediable. En momentos así es muy difícil que un hombre no sea injusto. Lydgate se vio como víctima y a los demás como responsables de arruinar su futuro. Había querido que todo fuera distinto y otros se habían introducido a la fuerza en su vida, desbaratando sus propósitos. Su matrimonio le pareció un desastre absoluto; y tuvo miedo de volver junto a Rosamond antes de haber desahogado su rabia solitaria, no fuera que el simple hecho de verla le exasperase y le hiciera comportarse de manera injustificable. Hay episodios en la vida de la mayoría de los hombres en los que sus mejores cualidades solo alcanzan a arrojar sombras disuasorias sobre los objetos que llenan su visión interior: la ternura de Lydgate estaba únicamente presente entonces como un temor a desvirtuarla, no como una emoción que le inclinase a actos positivos. Porque se sentía muy desgraciado. Solo quienes conocen la supremacía de la vida intelectual —la vida que tiene una semilla de ideas y de propósitos ennoblecedores dentro de sí— pueden entender el dolor de alguien que desciende de esa serena actividad a la lucha absorbente y agotadora con los problemas del mundo.

¿Cómo podría seguir viviendo entre personas que lo creían culpable de bajeza si no demostraba su inocencia? ¿Cómo podía marcharse de Middlemarch sin decir nada, dando la impresión de escabullirse ante una condena merecida? Y, sin embargo, ¿estaba en su mano hacer algo para justificarse?

Porque la escena presenciada durante la reunión, aun sin proporcionarle detalles, había bastado para que su situación le resultara perfectamente clara. Bulstrode temía las revelaciones escandalosas que Raffles hubiera podido hacer. Lydgate estaba ahora en condiciones de imaginar todos los ingredientes del caso. «Temía que ese hombre contara algo en mi presencia: deseaba ligarme a él mediante un favor muy importante; esa es la razón de que pasara en veinticuatro horas de la dureza a la generosidad. Y puede que jugara sucio con el enfermo… quizá desobedeciera mis órdenes. Me temo que fue así. Pero tanto si lo hizo como si no, el mundo cree que envenenó a ese hombre y que yo hice la vista gorda, o incluso que colaboré con él. Y, sin embargo… y, sin embargo, quizá Bulstrode no sea culpable de ese último delito; y también es posible que su cambio respecto a mí obedezca a un sentimiento auténtico… que lo hubiera pensado mejor, como él alegó. Lo que llamamos “apenas posible” a veces es verdad y lo que consideramos más razonable es totalmente falso. En sus últimas relaciones con Raffles, quizá tuviera Bulstrode las manos limpias a pesar de mis sospechas».

Su situación era de una dificultad paralizante. Incluso aunque renunciara a cualquier otra consideración que no fuese justificarse… si se enfrentara a los encogimientos de hombros, a las miradas frías y a los esfuerzos por ignorarlo, aceptándolos como una acusación, e hiciese una declaración pública de todos los

hechos tal como él los conocía, ¿quién se convencería? Sería estúpido ofrecer su testimonio en defensa propia y decir: «No acepté el dinero como soborno». Las circunstancias serían siempre más fuertes que sus afirmaciones. Y, además, dar un paso al frente y contarlo todo requeriría hacer unas declaraciones sobre Bulstrode que aumentarían las sospechas contra él. Lydgate tendría que decir que no sabía nada de la existencia de Raffles cuando habló a Bulstrode de su urgente necesidad de dinero y que aceptó inocentemente las mil libras como resultado de aquella comunicación, sin saber que, al llamársele para atender al enfermo, había surgido un nuevo motivo a favor del préstamo. Y, después de todo, sus sospechas sobre los motivos de Bulstrode podían ser injustas.

A continuación se planteó si habría obrado exactamente de la misma manera en el caso de no recibir el dinero. Desde luego, si Raffles hubiese seguido con vida y capaz por tanto de continuar el tratamiento y él hubiera imaginado una posible desobediencia a sus órdenes, habría hecho una investigación rigurosa, y si sus conjeturas hubieran resultado ciertas habría abandonado el caso, a pesar de su reciente y profunda deuda de gratitud. Pero si no hubiese recibido dinero… si Bulstrode nunca hubiera revocado su glacial consejo de que se declarara en bancarrota… ¿se habría abstenido él, Lydgate, de toda investigación a pesar incluso de encontrar muerto al enfermo? El hecho de no atreverse a ofender a Bulstrode… lo dudoso de todos los tratamientos médicos y el argumento de que la mayoría de sus colegas calificarían el suyo de equivocado… todo aquello, ¿habría tenido para él la misma fuerza o el mismo significado?

Aquel era el rincón incómodo de su conciencia mientras repasaba los hechos y trataba de reivindicar su actuación. Si hubiera sido más independiente se habría mostrado mucho más firme en el asunto del tratamiento de un paciente, contando con la clarísima regla de que tenía que hacer, o asegurarse de que se hiciera, lo que creyese mejor para la vida encomendada a su cuidado. De hecho, se había apoyado en la consideración de que la desobediencia a sus órdenes, fuera cual fuese su causa, no podía considerarse un delito, dado que según la opinión dominante la misma obediencia podía resultar igualmente fatal y que todo el asunto era tan solo una cuestión de forma. Mientras que, una y otra vez, durante su época de libertad, había denunciado la transformación injustificada de la duda patológica en duda moral y había dicho: «El tratamiento más puramente experimental no tiene por qué dejar de ser concienzudo: mi tarea es cuidar de una vida y hacerlo de la mejor manera que se me ocurra. La ciencia es más escrupulosa que el dogma. El dogma da patente de corso al error, pero el aliento mismo de la ciencia es la lucha contra el error y tiene que mantener viva esa conciencia». Desgraciadamente, la conciencia científica se había encontrado en la compañía degradante de los favores económicos y de los respetos egoístas.

«¿Algún médico de todos los que hay en Middlemarch se interrogaría como yo lo estoy haciendo? —se dijo el pobre Lydgate, con un renovado estallido de rebelión contra lo angustioso de su destino—. Y, sin embargo, ¡todos se sentirán justificados para apartarse de mí lo más posible, como si fuera un leproso! Mi clientela y mi reputación han quedado irremediablemente dañadas… lo veo con toda claridad. Aunque se pudiera demostrar mi inocencia con pruebas válidas, eso significaría muy poco para el bendito mundo de aquí. Se me ha clasificado como corrupto y me despreciarán en cualquier caso».

Ya se habían producido abundantes signos, aunque hasta entonces le hubiera desconcertado el hecho de que, cuando pagó sus deudas y sintió de nuevo con júbilo que pisaba terreno firme, sus conciudadanos evitaran mirarlo o lo hicieran de forma extraña, o de que en dos ocasiones llegara a su conocimiento que pacientes suyos habían llamado a otro médico. Las razones habían quedado ya perfectamente claras. Habían empezado a hacerle el vacío de manera general.

Nada tiene de sorprendente que en el caso de un carácter enérgico como el de Lydgate la sensación de una irremediable mala interpretación se transformara con facilidad en resistencia testaruda. El fruncimiento de frente y cejas que a veces aparecía en su rostro no era simple casualidad. Cuando regresó de nuevo a la ciudad después de aquel paseo en las primeras horas de dolor punzante, Lydgate ya estaba afirmándose en la idea de seguir en Middlemarch a pesar de todo lo que pudieran hacer contra él. No retrocedería ante la calumnia como si la aceptara. Se enfrentaría a ella con todas sus fuerzas, y ninguno de sus actos pondría de manifiesto que tuviera miedo. Formaba parte de su generosidad así como del ímpetu desafiante de su carácter la decisión de manifestar con claridad su sentimiento de gratitud a Bulstrode. Era cierto que su asociación con aquel hombre le había sido fatal… cierto que, si hubiera tenido las mil libras en la mano y todas sus deudas sin pagar, le hubiera devuelto el dinero a Bulstrode, para dedicarse a la mendicidad antes que aceptar un rescate manchado por la sospecha del soborno (porque, recuérdese, Lydgate era uno de los más orgullosos entre los hijos de los hombres)… No abandonaría, sin embargo, a aquel prójimo suyo tan anonadado cuya ayuda había recibido, ni haría un lamentable esfuerzo para conseguir la absolución echándole las culpas a otro. «Haré lo que considere justo y no daré explicaciones a nadie. Tratarán de sitiarme por hambre, pero…», seguía diciéndose con obstinada determinación; la proximidad a su casa, sin

embargo, exigió que el recuerdo de Rosamond se colocara de nuevo en el sitio de honor del que había sido desplazado por los dolorosos forcejeos del honor y del orgullo heridos.

¿Cómo se tomaría todo aquello su mujer? Era otra cadena que arrastrar y el pobre Lydgate se hallaba en un pésimo estado de ánimo para soportar la estúpida superioridad de Rosamond. No sentía deseos de contarle las dificultades que muy pronto tendrían que compartir. Prefería esperar a la inevitable revelación que los acontecimientos no tardarían mucho en alumbrar.

Capítulo LXXIV

Dígnate compadecerte de ella y de mí para que lleguemos juntos a la vejez.

Libro de Tobías, «Oración del matrimonio»

En Middlemarch era imposible que una esposa permaneciera mucho tiempo ignorante de que la ciudad tenía mala opinión de su marido. Quizá ninguna amiga íntima llevase su afecto tan lejos como para exponer con sencillez a la interesada los desagradables hechos que se conocían o se creían conocer sobre su marido; pero cuando una mujer con mucho tiempo libre para dar vueltas a la imaginación podía emplearla de repente en analizar algo muy desfavorable para sus vecinos, concurrían diferentes impulsos morales susceptibles de estimular su revelación. La sinceridad era uno de ellos. Ser sincero, según la fraseología de Middlemarch, significaba usar la primera ocasión disponible para hacer saber a esos amigos que no se tenía una visión positiva ni de su capacidad, ni de su conducta, ni de su posición; y una sinceridad vigorosa nunca esperaba a que se pidiera su parecer. Venía a continuación el amor a la verdad: una afirmación muy general pero que en esta acepción significaba oponerse con energía a que una esposa tuviera un aire más alegre de lo que justificaba la reputación de su marido, o se mostrara en exceso satisfecha con su suerte: a la pobre criatura había que insinuarle que, si supiera la verdad, se complacería menos en el sombrero que llevaba y en nuevas recetas de platos ligeros para una cena con invitados. Más fuerte que todos los demás impulsos era la preocupación por la reforma moral de la amiga, a veces identificada con su alma, que saldría beneficiada mediante observaciones tendentes a la melancolía, pronunciadas con acompañamiento de miradas pensativas a los muebles y una actitud en la que quedara implícito que no se decía todo lo que se sabía en consideración a los sentimientos de la interlocutora. Podía afirmarse, en conjunto, que una caridad ardiente empujaba a las almas virtuosas a hacer desgraciadas a sus vecinas por su propio bien.

Difícilmente se encontraría en Middlemarch a otras esposas, además de Rosamond y su tía, la señora Bulstrode, cuyas desgracias matrimoniales despertaran más la actividad moral de sus vecinas, aunque fuese de manera distinta. La mujer del banquero no le era antipática a nadie y nunca había ofendido de manera deliberada a ningún ser humano. Los hombres siempre la habían considerado una mujer bien parecida y de trato agradable, e incluían entre los signos de la hipocresía de Bulstrode que hubiera elegido por esposa a una Vincy de sangre caliente, en lugar de la persona cadavérica y melancólica que le habría correspondido dada su escasa estima por los placeres terrenales. Cuando se hizo público el escándalo sobre el banquero, sus conciudadanos dijeron de ella: «Ah, ¡pobrecilla! Es tan buena como el pan… nunca ha sospechado nada de él, pueden estar seguros». Sus amigas hablaban mucho entre sí de la «pobre Harriet», imaginándose sus sentimientos cuando llegara a enterarse de todo y haciendo conjeturas sobre lo que ya sabría. No existían actitudes rencorosas hacia ella; más bien una afanosa benevolencia deseosa de averiguar qué era lo que estaría bien que sintiera e hiciese en aquellas circunstancias, cosa que, por supuesto, mantenía la imaginación ocupada con su manera de ser y con su historia desde la época en que era todavía Harriet Vincy hasta el momento presente. Al repasar la vida de la señora Bulstrode y su situación actual, era inevitable asociarla con Rosamond, cuyo futuro se había ensombrecido tanto como el de su tía. A Rosamond se la criticaba con mayor severidad y se la compadecía menos, aunque también a ella, como miembro de la buena y antigua familia de los Vincy, conocida desde siempre en Middlemarch, se la consideraba víctima del matrimonio con un intruso. Los Vincy tenían sus debilidades, pero todas quedaban muy en la superficie: nunca había nada malo que «descubrir» acerca de ellos. Se negaba de manera terminante que la señora

Bulstrode tuviera parecido alguno con su marido. Las faltas de Harriet eran exclusivamente suyas.

—Siempre ha sido ostentosa —dijo la señora Hackbutt, mientras preparaba el té para un pequeño grupo —, aunque se acostumbró a poner en primer término la religión para asemejarse a su marido. Ha tratado de estar por encima de Middlemarch haciendo saber que invita a clérigos y Dios sabe qué de Riverston y de otros sitios parecidos.

—No se lo podemos echar en cara —dijo la señora Sprague—; porque entre las personas más importantes de la ciudad muy pocas querían tratar a Bulstrode, y Harriet necesitaba contar con alguien a quien sentar a su mesa.

—El señor Thesiger siempre ha defendido a Bulstrode —dijo la señora Hackbutt—. Supongo que ahora lo lamentará.

—Pero nunca le ha gustado de verdad… eso lo sabe todo el mundo —dijo la esposa de Tom Toller—. El señor Thesiger no es nada radical. Se limita a afirmar la verdad en todo lo que es evangélico. Tan solo clérigos como el señor Tyke, que quieren imponer los libros de himnos de los disidentes y defienden esas prácticas religiosas tan vulgares, estaban realmente de acuerdo con Bulstrode.

—Según tengo entendido, el señor Tyke está muy afectado —comentó la señora Hackbutt—. Y supongo que con razón: dicen que los Bulstrode casi mantenían a la familia de Tyke.

—Y por supuesto es un descrédito para sus doctrinas —dijo la señora Sprague, que era de edad bastante avanzada y anticuada en sus opiniones—. Pasará una buena temporada antes de que nadie presuma de metodismo en Middlemarch.

—Creo que no debemos atribuir las malas acciones de las personas a su religión —dijo la señora Plymdale, siempre con su cara de ave de presa, y que hasta entonces no había hecho otra cosa que escuchar.

—Claro que no —dijo la señora Sprague—; nos habíamos olvidado de que no debemos hablar de estas cosas delante de usted.

—No creo tener motivos para ser poco objetiva —dijo la señora Plymdale, ruborizándose—. Es cierto que mi marido siempre ha tenido buenas relaciones con el señor Bulstrode y que Harriet Vincy era amiga mía mucho antes de casarse con él. Pero nunca he renunciado a mis opiniones personales y siempre la he criticado cuando hacía algo mal, pobrecilla. En cualquier caso, en lo que a religión se refiere, tengo que decir que el señor Bulstrode podría haber hecho todo lo que ha hecho, y cosas aún peores, y ser de todos modos un hombre sin religión. No voy a negar que haya habido un poco de exceso en ese aspecto… yo misma soy partidaria de la moderación. Pero la verdad es la verdad. Los hombres a los que juzgan los tribunales no son excesivamente religiosos, supongo.

—Bueno —dijo la señora Hackbutt, cambiando hábilmente de tema—, lo único que puedo decir es que, en mi opinión, Harriet Vincy debería separarse de su marido.

—Yo no diría eso —intervino la señora Sprague—. Lo aceptó para el bien y para el mal, creo yo.

—Pero «el mal» nunca incluye descubrir que tu marido es carne de presidio —dijo la señora Hackbutt—. ¡Imagínense vivir con un hombre así! Yo tendría miedo de que me envenenara en cualquier momento.

—Estoy de acuerdo; creo que permitir que buenas esposas cuiden y sirvan a hombres así es fomentar la delincuencia —dijo la señora Toller.

—Y la pobre Harriet sí que ha sido una buena esposa —dijo la señora Plymdale—. Cree que su marido es el mejor de los hombres. También es cierto que Bulstrode nunca le ha negado nada.

—Bueno, ya veremos lo que hace —dijo la señora Hackbutt—. Imagino que todavía no está enterada, pobre criatura. Espero y confío en no tropezarme con ella, porque sería horrible que se me escapara algo sobre su marido. ¿Creen ustedes que le habrá llegado algún rumor?

—Lo veo muy difícil —dijo la señora Toller—. Bulstrode está enfermo y no ha salido de casa desde la reunión del jueves; pero ella fue ayer a la iglesia con sus hijas y llevaban sombreros nuevos. El de Harriet con una pluma. Nunca me ha parecido que la religión tuviera la menor influencia sobre su manera de vestir.

—Utiliza siempre telas de dibujo muy sencillo —dijo la señora Plymdale, un tanto molesta—. Y esa pluma sé que la tiñó a propósito de color lavanda pálido para que estuviera a tono. Tengo que decir que Harriet siempre se esfuerza por hacer las cosas bien.

—En cuanto a saber lo que ha sucedido, no se le podrá ocultar mucho tiempo —dijo la señora Hackbutt —. Los Vincy lo saben, porque el señor Vincy estaba en la reunión. Tiene que ser un golpe terrible para él. ¡Su hija, además de su hermana!

—Así es, efectivamente —dijo la señora Sprague—. Nadie cree que el señor Lydgate pueda seguir yendo con la cabeza alta por Middlemarch, después de aceptar mil libras al morir ese hombre. Una se estremece al

pensarlo.

—El orgullo acaba derrumbándose —sentenció la señora Hackbutt.

—Yo no me compadezco tanto de Rosamond Vincy como de su tía —dijo la señora Plymdale—. Esa muchacha necesitaba una lección.

—Supongo que Bulstrode se irá a vivir al extranjero —dijo la señora Sprague—. Eso es lo que suele hacerse por regla general cuando sucede algo vergonzoso en la familia.

—Y será un golpe terrible para Harriet —dijo la señora Plymdale—. Estoy convencida de que para ella será todavía peor que para otras mujeres. La compadezco de todo corazón. Y, a pesar de sus faltas, es una persona excelente. Desde jovencita siempre ha sido de lo más pulcro, con muy buenos sentimientos y más sincera que nadie. Se puede mirar en sus cajones cuando se quiera; siempre están en orden. Y a Kate y a Ellen las ha educado de la misma manera. Imagínense lo duro que será para ella irse a vivir entre extranjeros.

—Mi marido dice que eso es lo que él recomendaría a Rosamond y a su marido —sentenció la señora Sprague—. Asegura que Lydgate tendría que haberse quedado con los franceses.

—Eso no le vendría nada mal a Rosamond, creo yo —dijo la señora Plymdale—; es la clase de frivolidad que le gusta. Pero le viene de su madre; nunca lo aprendió de su tía Harriet, que siempre le dio buenos consejos y que, por lo que tengo entendido, hubiese preferido que se casara con otro.

La señora Plymdale se encontraba en una situación que creaba cierta ambigüedad en sus sentimientos. No solo existía su intimidad con la señora Bulstrode, sino también una provechosa asociación comercial de la gran tintorería Plymdale con el banquero, lo que, por una parte, le hubiera inclinado a desear que fuera cierta la versión más favorable sobre las acciones del señor Bulstrode, pero, por otra, aumentaba el peligro de que pareciera deseosa de atenuar su culpa. Además, la reciente unión de su familia con los Toller la había relacionado con los mejores círculos de Middlemarch, cosa que le agradaba en todos los sentidos excepto en su inclinación hacia unas convicciones religiosas que para ella eran las mejores. La conciencia de aquella incisiva y diminuta mujer encontraba dificultades al tratar de coordinar los opuestos «mejores», así como el pesar y la satisfacción ante los últimos acontecimientos, que muy probablemente humillarían a quienes merecían ser humillados, pero que también caerían con todo su peso sobre su amiga íntima, cuyas faltas hubiera preferido seguir viendo sobre un fondo de prosperidad.

Mientras tanto, la presencia ya tan cercana de la calamidad no había tenido otro efecto sobre la pobre señora Bulstrode que hacer aflorar de nuevo el secreto desasosiego que no la había abandonado desde la última visita de Raffles a Los Arbustos. Que aquel hombre odioso hubiera llegado enfermo a Stone Court y que su marido hubiera decidido quedarse allí y velarlo, se explicaba porque Raffles había sido empleado de Bulstrode y recibió ayuda de su marido en tiempos pretéritos y eso creaba un lazo de caridad con él en su degradado desvalimiento, y a partir de entonces la señora Bulstrode se había sentido inocentemente reconfortada por las palabras optimistas de su marido sobre su propia salud y sobre su capacidad para seguir atendiendo los negocios. Esta calma se rompió cuando Lydgate lo trajo enfermo a casa después de la reunión y, a pesar de las promesas consoladoras de los siguientes días, la señora Bulstrode lloró a solas convencida de que su marido no sufría una enfermedad corporal, sino algo que le afectaba el espíritu. No le había permitido que le leyera, ni prácticamente que le hiciera compañía, alegando susceptibilidad nerviosa a ruidos y movimientos; sin embargo, la señora Bulstrode sospechaba que, al encerrarse en su habitación, lo que deseaba era ocuparse de sus papeles. Estaba segura de que algo había sucedido. Quizá una gran pérdida de dinero; y a ella se la mantenía ignorante. El quinto día después de la reunión —no se había movido de casa excepto para ir a la iglesia no atreviéndose a preguntar a su marido—, le dijo a Lydgate:

—Señor Lydgate, por favor, sea sincero conmigo: me gusta saber la verdad. ¿Le ha sucedido algo al señor Bulstrode?

—Algún pequeño sobresalto nervioso —dijo el médico de manera evasiva. No creía que fuese misión suya hacer la penosa revelación.

—Pero ¿qué lo ha producido? —preguntó la señora Bulstrode, mirándolo directamente con sus grandes ojos oscuros.

—Con frecuencia hay algo nocivo en la atmósfera de las salas donde se reúne mucha gente —dijo Lydgate—. Las personas robustas lo soportan, pero otras lo acusan de acuerdo con la delicadeza de su organismo. A menudo es imposible dar razón del momento preciso de un ataque… o más bien, decir por qué cede el cuerpo en un momento determinado.

A la señora Bulstrode no le satisfizo aquella respuesta. Siguió creyendo que su marido había sido víctima de alguna calamidad y que a ella se la dejaba a oscuras sobre lo sucedido; y era muy propio de su carácter oponerse con todas sus fuerzas a semejante ocultación. Pidió a sus hijas que cuidaran de su padre y ella se

dirigió a la ciudad para hacer algunas visitas, suponiendo que, si los negocios de su marido iban mal, vería u oiría algo que se lo confirmara.

Fue a visitar a la señora Thesiger, que había salido, y luego se dirigió a la casa de la señora Hackbutt, al otro lado del cementerio. La señora Hackbutt la vio venir desde una ventana del piso alto y, recordando su temor a encontrarse con ella, se sintió casi obligada a decir a los criados que no estaba en casa; pero contra aquello surgió en su interior un gran deseo de vivir las emociones de una entrevista en la que estaba completamente decidida a no hacer la menor alusión a lo que tan presente tenía en la cabeza.

De aquí que la señora Bulstrode fuera conducida al salón, donde la recibió la señora Hackbutt, con los labios más apretados y frotándose más las manos de lo que tenía por costumbre, precauciones ambas contra un exceso de libertad en las palabras. Estaba decidida a no interesarse por la salud del señor Bulstrode.

—No he ido a ningún otro sitio que a la iglesia desde hace casi una semana —dijo la señora Bulstrode, después de algunas frases de cortesía—. Pero mi marido se puso tan enfermo en la reunión del jueves que he preferido no salir de casa.

La señora Hackbutt se frotó el dorso de una mano con la palma de la otra, manteniéndolas pegadas al pecho, mientras sus ojos vagaban por los dibujos de la alfombra.

—¿Estuvo el señor Hackbutt en la reunión? —perseveró la señora Bulstrode.

—Sí, sí —dijo la señora Hackbutt, sin cambiar de actitud—. Creo que los terrenos se comprarán por suscripción.

—Dios quiera que no haya necesidad de enterrar allí a más víctimas del cólera —dijo la señora Bulstrode —. Es una enfermedad terrible. Pero siempre he creído que Middlemarch es un lugar muy sano. Supongo que se debe a que estoy acostumbrada a esto desde pequeña; no conozco otra ciudad donde prefiriera vivir y sobre todo pasar mis últimos años.

—Me encantaría que viviera usted siempre en Middlemarch, señora Bulstrode —dijo la señora Hackbutt con un leve suspiro—. Pero tenemos que aprender a resignarnos. Aunque estoy segura de que siempre habrá personas en esta ciudad que le deseen toda la suerte del mundo.

La señora Hackbutt sentía grandes deseos de decir: «Si me permite darle un consejo, abandone a su marido», pero estaba claro que aquella pobre mujer no sabía nada del trueno que se le vendría encima en cualquier momento y ella no podía hacer más que prepararla un poco. La señora Bulstrode se sintió de repente temblorosa y con frío; había sin duda algo inaudito tras las palabras de la señora Hackbutt y, aunque había salido de casa con el deseo de saberlo todo, se vio incapaz de perseverar en su valerosa decisión, cambió de conversación mediante algunas preguntas sobre los jóvenes Hackbutt, se despidió muy pronto y dijo que iba a ver a la señora Plymdale. De camino a casa de su amiga acarició la hipótesis de que quizá hubiese habido en la reunión un enfrentamiento más animado de lo habitual entre el señor Bulstrode y algunos de sus habituales oponentes… quizá el señor Hackbutt fuese uno de ellos. Eso lo explicaría todo.

Sin embargo, al empezar a hablar con la señora Plymdale, comprendió que aquella explicación consoladora era insostenible. Su amiga Selina la recibió con patéticas manifestaciones de afecto y una clara inclinación a dar respuestas edificantes a preguntas sobre los temas más ordinarios, respuestas que difícilmente podían estar relacionadas con una simple pelea cuya consecuencia más destacada hubiese sido un quebranto en la salud de su marido. Al entrar en la casa, la señora Bulstrode estaba convencida de que prefería interrogar a Selina antes que a nadie; pero descubrió con sorpresa que una amiga de toda la vida no es siempre la persona a quien resulta más fácil hacer confidencias: existía la barrera, presente en el recuerdo, de la comunicación íntima en otras circunstancias… existía la repugnancia a que la compadeciera e informase alguien que siempre había reconocido la superioridad de la señora Bulstrode. Ciertas palabras misteriosamente oportunas que la señora Plymdale dejó caer sobre su propósito de no volver la espalda a sus amigos, convencieron a la señora Bulstrode de que lo sucedido tenía que ser alguna gran calamidad y, en lugar de ser capaz de decir con su ingénita franqueza: «¿En qué estás pensando?», se notó deseosa de marcharse antes de oír algo más concreto. Empezó a tener la angustiada certeza de que el desastre era algo más que una simple pérdida de dinero, al advertir con gran claridad que Selina, igual que había hecho antes la señora Hackbutt, evitaba enterarse de lo que ella decía sobre su marido, igual que hubieran evitado darse por enteradas de un defecto físico.

La señora Bulstrode se despidió de su amiga con nerviosa precipitación y dijo al cochero que la llevara al almacén del señor Vincy. Durante el breve recorrido sus temores alcanzaron tanta fuerza, por la sensación de oscuridad que la embargaba, que cuando entró en el despacho privado donde su hermano se hallaba detrás de un escritorio, le temblaban las rodillas, y su rostro, normalmente rubicundo, tenía una palidez mortal. Algo parecido le sucedió al señor Vincy al verla; se alzó del asiento para recibirla, la cogió de la mano y dijo con su impulsiva precipitación:

—¡Que Dios te tenga de su mano, Harriet! Ya veo que lo sabes todo.

Aquel momento fue quizá peor que todos los que vinieron después. Contenía esa concentración de experiencias que en las grandes crisis revela las inclinaciones de una personalidad y profetiza el acto final en que desembocará el anterior forcejeo. Sin el recuerdo de Raffles, la señora Bulstrode quizá hubiera seguido pensando en la ruina económica, pero ahora, junto con la mirada y las palabras de su hermano, surgió de improviso en su cabeza la idea de alguna culpa de su marido; luego, bajo la influencia del terror, vio la imagen del señor Bulstrode expuesto al oprobio y, a continuación, después de un instante de terrible vergüenza en el que solo tuvo conciencia de los ojos del mundo, con un simple movimiento del corazón se halló al lado de su marido compartiendo afligida la deshonra y el aislamiento, pero sin hacerle ningún reproche. Todo esto sucedió en un relámpago de tiempo… mientras se desplomaba en la silla y alzaba los ojos hacia su hermano, de pie junto a ella.

—No sé nada, Walter. ¿De qué se trata? —dijo, débilmente.

El señor Vincy se lo contó todo, sin andarse con rodeos, pero también sin prisas, haciéndole tomar conciencia de que el escándalo iba más allá de las pruebas existentes, especialmente en lo relativo a la muerte de Raffles.

—La gente hablará —dijo el señor Vincy—. Incluso aunque a una persona la absuelva un jurado, la gente habla y mueve la cabeza y hace guiños… y, tal como va el mundo, muchas veces da lo mismo que sea culpable o inocente. Es un golpe terrible y perjudica a Lydgate tanto como a Bulstrode. No pretendo saber la verdad. Solo quisiera que no hubiéramos oído hablar nunca ni de Bulstrode ni de Lydgate. Más te valdría haber sido una Vincy toda tu vida y lo mismo Rosamond.

La señora Bulstrode no respondió.

—Tienes que llevarlo lo mejor que puedas, Harriet. La gente no te culpa a ti. Y yo estaré a tu lado cualquiera que sea la decisión que tomes —dijo el señor Vincy, con una afectuosidad áspera pero bien intencionada.

—Dame el brazo para ir hasta el coche, Walter —dijo la señora Bulstrode—. Me siento muy débil.

Y cuando llegó a casa se vio obligada a decirle a su hija:

—No me encuentro bien, querida; tengo que echarme un rato. Cuida de tu papá. A mí déjame descansar. No cenaré.

La señora Bulstrode se encerró en su cuarto. Necesitaba tiempo para aceptarse como criatura lisiada, para acostumbrarse a su pobre vida truncada, antes de dirigirse con paso firme al sitio que le tocaba ocupar. Una nueva luz reveladora se había posado sobre su marido, impidiendo que pudiera juzgarlo con benevolencia: los veinte años de insinceridad durante los que había creído en él y lo había venerado, pasaban ante ella con detalles que los hacían parecer un fraude odioso. Bulstrode se había casado ocultando su vida pasada y a Harriet ya no le quedaba fe para creerlo inocente de las peores cosas que se le imputaban. Su honradez innata y su manera de ser, nada partidaria de una vida retirada, hacían que tener que compartir una merecida deshonra le resultara tan amargo como al que más.

Pero aquella mujer sin gran educación, cuyas frases y costumbres eran una extraña mezcla de cosas dispares, tenía un alma leal. No cabía pensar en que abandonara al hombre cuya prosperidad había compartido durante casi la mitad de una vida, al hombre que había estado pendiente de ella sin desfallecimientos, ahora que el castigo había caído sobre sus espaldas. Hay un abandono que se sigue sentando a la misma mesa y yace en el mismo lecho que el alma abandonada, marchitándola aún más con su proximidad desprovista de amor. La señora Bulstrode sabía, cuando se encerró en su cuarto, que volvería a salir dispuesta a bajar junto a su desdichado marido para abrazar su dolor y decirle: lloraré contigo y nada te reprocharé. Necesitaba, sin embargo, tiempo para hacer acopio de fortaleza; necesitaba despedirse, entre lágrimas, de toda la alegría y el orgullo de su vida. Cuando hubo decidido bajar, se preparó con algunos actos de poca importancia que hubieran parecido estúpidos a un espectador indiferente; eran su manera de expresar a todos, tanto a los que iban a verla como a los que no estaban presentes, que había empezado una nueva vida en la que abrazaba la humillación. Se quitó todos los adornos y se puso un sencillo vestido negro y, en lugar de llevar su elegante toca y sus voluminosos moños, se alisó el pelo, cubriéndolo con una cofia muy sencilla, con lo que adquirió repentinamente el aspecto de una de las primeras metodistas.

Bulstrode, sabedor de que su esposa había salido y había vuelto diciendo que no se encontraba bien, pasó el tiempo en tanta agitación como ella. Había previsto que se enterara de la verdad por otros y aceptó esa posibilidad, considerándola más llevadera que cualquier confesión suya. Ahora, al imaginar que ya lo sabía todo, aguardaba el resultado lleno de angustia. Había obligado a sus hijas a dejarlo solo y, aunque permitió que le llevaran algún alimento, no lo tocó. Se sentía sucumbir lentamente en medio de sufrimientos de los que nadie se compadecía. Quizá nunca volviera a ver en el rostro de su mujer una

expresión afectuosa. Y, si se volvía hacia Dios, no parecía encontrar otra respuesta que el peso del justo castigo.

Eran ya las ocho de la tarde cuando se abrió la puerta y entró Harriet. No se atrevió a mirarla y mantuvo los ojos bajos. La señora Bulstrode, mientras se acercaba a él, pensó que parecía más pequeño… terriblemente marchito y encogido. Un movimiento de compasión y de ternura antigua la atravesó como una gran ola y, poniendo una mano sobre la de su marido, que descansaba en el brazo del sillón, y la otra en su hombro, dijo, con tono solemne pero también afectuoso:

—Mírame, Nicholas.

Él alzó los ojos dando un pequeño respingo y la contempló con asombro durante un momento: su rostro pálido, el traje de luto, el temblor en torno a la boca, todo decía: «Lo sé»; y sus manos y sus ojos descansaban cariñosamente sobre él. Bulstrode se echó a llorar y los dos lloraron juntos, ella sentada a su lado. Aún no podían hablar de la vergüenza que sufrían unidos, ni de las acciones que habían sido su causa. La confesión de Bulstrode era silenciosa y silenciosa la promesa de fidelidad de su mujer. Aunque su actitud era receptiva, de comprensión, la señora Bulstrode rehuyó las palabras que hubieran expresado su mutuo entendimiento, como hubiese rehuido las chispas que arroja el fuego. No podía preguntar: «¿Qué parte de lo que se dice son solo calumnias y falsas sospechas?», y él tampoco dijo: «Soy inocente».

Capítulo LXXV

Le sentiment de la fausseté des plaisirs présents, et l'ignorance de la vanité des plaisirs absents, causent l'inconstance.[139]

PASCAL

Rosamond disfrutó de un destello de renovada alegría cuando la casa se vio libre de la amenazadora figura del agente de Dover y se pagó a todos aquellos acreedores tan desagradables. Pero no era feliz: su vida matrimonial no había satisfecho ninguna de sus esperanzas y suponía un completo fracaso frente a los vuelos de su imaginación. En aquel breve intervalo de calma, Lydgate, recordando que se había mostrado con frecuencia colérico en sus horas de angustia, así como los apuros por los que Rosamond había tenido que pasar, se mostró muy afectuoso con ella; pero también él había perdido algo de su antiguo brío, y sentía además la necesidad de insistir como algo inevitable en un cambio en su manera de vivir, tratando de que su mujer se hiciera a la idea gradualmente, y reprimía su indignación si le respondía expresando el deseo de que se trasladasen a Londres. Cuando no le daba esa contestación, Rosamond escuchaba con aire lánguido y se preguntaba si había algo por lo que mereciera la pena vivir. Las palabras duras y desdeñosas salidas de boca de su marido en sus arrebatos de cólera ofendieron profundamente la vanidad que él mismo había fomentado al principio con sus atenciones; y lo que Rosamond consideraba como su odiosa manera de ver las cosas mantenía viva una repugnancia secreta que le hacía recibir todas sus manifestaciones de ternura como un pobre sucedáneo de la felicidad que no había sido capaz de darle. Se hallaban en una posición desventajosa en relación con sus vecinos y ya no había ningún rayo de esperanza procedente de Quallingham… no quedaba nada que mereciera la pena excepto, de cuando en cuando, alguna carta de Will Ladislaw. La decisión de su joven amigo de abandonar Middlemarch la había herido y desilusionado porque, a pesar de lo que sabía y se imaginaba sobre su admiración por Dorothea, Rosamond acariciaba en secreto el convencimiento de que sentía, o de que llegaría a sentir, una mayor admiración por ella; porque era una de esas mujeres que viven con la idea de que todos los hombres que conocen las hubieran preferido si esa preferencia no hubiese sido un sueño imposible. La señora Casaubon era una mujer admirable; pero el interés de Will por ella era anterior a su encuentro con la señora Lydgate. Rosamond consideraba que la manera que tenía Ladislaw de hablar con ella —mezcla de crítica humorística y exagerada galantería— era un disfraz de sentimientos más profundos; y sentía en su presencia el agradable cosquilleo de la vanidad y la sensación de drama romántico que la presencia de Lydgate era ya incapaz de crear. Se imaginaba incluso —¿qué no llegarán a imaginarse los hombres y las mujeres en estos asuntos?— que Will exageraba su admiración por la señora Casaubon para estimular el interés de Rosamond. En tales cosas se ocupaba el cerebro de la señora Lydgate antes de la desaparición de Will. Ladislaw habría sido, pensaba ella, mucho mejor marido que Lydgate. Idea totalmente falsa, porque el descontento de Rosamond se debía a las características de la misma unión matrimonial, que exige autodominio y tolerancia, y no a la manera de ser de su marido; pero la agradable imagen de un «mejor» reñido con la realidad tenía un encanto sentimental que distraía su tedio. Rosamond elaboraba una tenue trama romántica que daba un poco de color a la monotonía de su vida: Will Ladislaw seguiría siempre soltero y viviría cerca de ella, para estar a su servicio y alimentar una pasión conocida pero nunca plenamente expresada, que lanzaría brillantes llamaradas de cuando en cuando en escenas repletas de interés. La marcha de Will había supuesto una desilusión acorde con el vigor de sus fantasías, y aumentado su hastío de Middlemarch; al principio, sin embargo, Rosamond contaba con el sueño alternativo de los placeres que la aguardaban en su trato con la familia de

Quallingham. Desde entonces los problemas de su vida matrimonial no habían hecho más que complicarse, y la ausencia de otras distracciones animaba sus pesarosas cavilaciones sobre aquella tenue trama romántica con la que en otro tiempo se había alimentado. Hombres y mujeres cometen terribles equivocaciones acerca de sus propios síntomas, aceptando sus vagos anhelos y desasosiegos unas veces como pruebas de genialidad, otras de sentimiento religioso y, con más frecuencia aún, de la existencia de un apasionado amor. Will Ladislaw había escrito cartas llenas de anécdotas, mitad para Rosamond y mitad para su marido; ella las había contestado: su separación, pensaba la señora Lydgate, no era probable que fuese definitiva, y el cambio que más deseaba era que Tertius decidiera trasladarse a Londres; allí todo resultaría agradable, y Rosamond se había puesto a trabajar con tranquila perseverancia para lograr aquel resultado cuando surgió una repentina y deliciosa promesa que la animó en gran medida.

Sucedió muy poco antes de la memorable reunión en el ayuntamiento y fue nada menos que una carta para Lydgate en la que Will Ladislaw hablaba sobre todo de su nuevo interés por ciertos planes de colonización, pero mencionaba, de manera casual, que quizá se viera obligado a hacer una visita a Middlemarch en una fecha próxima… una obligación muy agradable, decía, casi tan apetecible como las vacaciones para un escolar. Esperaba poder contar aún con su antiguo sitio en la alfombra y con grandes cantidades de música aguardándolo. Aunque no podía precisar el cuándo con exactitud. Mientras Lydgate le leía la carta, el rostro de Rosamond parecía una flor reavivada… se hizo más bello y lozano. Ya no había nada insoportable: las deudas estaban pagadas, volvía el señor Ladislaw y Lydgate se dejaría convencer para marcharse de Middlemarch e instalarse en Londres, que era «tan distinto a una ciudad de provincias».

Aquella fue una mañana radiante. Pero pronto el cielo se oscureció para Rosamond. La nueva melancolía de Lydgate, sobre la que el médico no hizo la menor confidencia a su mujer —porque temía exponer sus sentimientos en carne viva a la neutralidad y a las falsas interpretaciones de Rosamond—, recibió muy pronto una penosa y extraña explicación, ajena a todas sus ideas previas sobre las cosas que podían enturbiar su felicidad. Con su nueva provisión de alegría, pensando que el problema de su marido era simplemente un ataque de melancolía peor que el de otras veces, responsable de que no contestara a sus observaciones y de que procurara lo más posible evitar confrontaciones con ella, Rosamond decidió, pocos días después de la reunión en el ayuntamiento y sin hablar con él acerca del asunto, enviar invitaciones para una cena de pocos comensales, convencida de que era un paso muy juicioso, ya que la gente parecía haberse mantenido un tanto distante de ellos y era preciso reanudar la antigua costumbre de las relaciones sociales. Cuando los invitados aceptasen, se lo diría a Lydgate, añadiendo una prudente advertencia sobre cómo un médico debía comportarse con sus vecinos; porque Rosamond se tomaba muy en serio los deberes de las demás personas. Pero nadie aceptó la invitación y la última respuesta vino a parar a manos de Lydgate.

—Esta letra es de Chichely. ¿Sobre qué te escribe? —dijo el médico, con gesto de asombro, mientras le pasaba la carta.

Rosamond se vio obligada a dejársela ver.

—¿Por qué demonios has estado mandando invitaciones sin decírmelo? —exclamó su marido, mirándola con severidad—. Te suplico, te ruego encarecidamente que no invites a nadie a esta casa. Supongo que habrás escrito a otros y también habrán dicho que no.

Rosamond no respondió.

—¿Es que no oyes? —bramó Lydgate.

—Sí, claro que te oigo —dijo Rosamond, inclinando la cabeza con la gracia de una elegante ave de largo cuello.

Lydgate agitó bruscamente la suya sin la menor elegancia y abandonó la habitación, sintiéndose a punto de estallar. Rosamond, por su parte, pensó que su marido se volvía cada vez más insoportable… sin ocurrírsele que hubiera alguna razón especial para aquel autoritarismo. La poca inclinación de Lydgate a contar cosas que sabía de antemano carentes de interés para su esposa se estaba convirtiendo en costumbre maquinal, y Rosamond ignoraba todo lo relacionado con las mil libras excepto que el préstamo procedía de su tío Nicholas. De manera inexplicable para ella, el odioso mal humor de Lydgate y el vacío que al parecer les estaban haciendo sus vecinos databan del momento en que se habían visto libres de sus dificultades económicas. Si las invitaciones hubieran sido aceptadas, habría ido a continuación a invitar a su madre y al resto de la familia, de quienes no sabía nada desde hacía varios días; de todos modos se puso el sombrero para ir y enterarse de qué había pasado con todos ellos, sintiéndose de repente víctima de una conjura para dejarla sola con aquel marido dispuesto a ofender a todo el mundo. Era ya después de la hora de cenar, y Rosamond encontró a su padre y a su madre juntos en el salón. La saludaron con miradas llenas de tristeza, diciendo: «¡Hola, hija mía!» y nada más. Rosamond nunca había visto a su padre con un aspecto tan

abatido; y sentándose cerca de él, preguntó:

—¿Es que pasa algo, papá?

Él no contestó, pero la señora Vincy dijo:

—Vamos, Rosy, ¿es posible que no hayas oído nada? No tardarás mucho en enterarte.

—¿Tiene que ver con Tertius? —dijo Rosamond palideciendo. De inmediato relacionó la idea de algún infortunio con lo que hasta entonces le había parecido inexplicable en el comportamiento de su marido.

—Así es, efectivamente. ¡Pensar que te has casado para tener tantos problemas! Las deudas ya eran mala cosa, pero esto será peor.

—Cálmate, Lucy —dijo el señor Vincy—. ¿No has oído nada sobre tu tío Nicholas, Rosamond?

—No, papá —dijo la pobrecilla, sintiendo como si las dificultades no fueran algo que ya había experimentado antes, sino un poder invisible que con mano de hierro la hacía desfallecer interiormente.

Su padre se lo contó todo, diciéndole al final:

—Es mejor que lo sepas, hija mía. Creo que Lydgate tendrá que marcharse. Las cosas se han puesto contra él. Supongo que no ha podido evitarlo. Yo no le acuso de haber hecho nada malo —dijo el señor Vincy. Antes siempre había estado dispuesto a atribuir a su yerno las peores faltas.

Para Rosamond el golpe fue terrible. Le pareció que nadie podía tener una suerte tan cruel como la suya… casada con un hombre convertido en blanco de sospechas infamantes. En muchos casos es inevitable que la vergüenza se nos aparezca como la peor parte de un delito; y habría sido necesaria una gran cantidad de reflexiones aclaratorias, en un grado nunca presente en la vida de Rosamond, para que en aquellos momentos se diese cuenta de que sus problemas no eran tan graves como si se supiera con certeza que su marido había cometido un delito. Sintió, acumulada, toda la vergüenza del mundo. ¡Y ella se había casado inocentemente, convencida de que Lydgate y su familia lograrían encumbrarla! Pero con sus padres se mostró tan reservada como de costumbre, y solo dijo que, si su marido hubiera sido más razonable, habrían abandonado Middlemarch hacía ya mucho tiempo.

—Lo lleva admirablemente bien —dijo su madre cuando Rosamond se hubo marchado.

—¡Gracias a Dios! —dijo el señor Vincy, que se sentía muy abatido.

Rosamond volvió a su casa con un sentimiento de justificada repugnancia por su marido. ¿Qué había hecho realmente? ¿Cómo había obrado? No lo sabía. ¿Por qué no se lo contaba? Lydgate no había hablado con ella y, por supuesto, Rosamond no iba a preguntárselo. Se le ocurrió que quizá su padre la dejara volver a su casa; pero al examinar más de cerca aquel proyecto le pareció terriblemente melancólico: una mujer casada que vuelve a vivir con sus padres; la existencia parecía carecer de sentido en semejante situación: no era capaz de verse a sí misma en ella.

Durante los dos días siguientes Lydgate observó un cambio en Rosamond y pensó que se había enterado de las malas noticias. ¿Hablaría con él o seguiría guardando un silencio que parecía implicar que lo consideraba culpable? Debemos recordar que el joven médico estaba muy afectado, y que casi cualquier contacto le resultaba doloroso. Es cierto que ahora Rosamond tenía razones similares para quejarse de su excesiva reserva y falta de confianza; pero, con el alma llena de amargura, Lydgate se excusaba; ¿no estaba justificado que rehuyera la tarea de contárselo a su mujer, puesto que ella, después de enterarse de lo sucedido, no sentía deseos de hablar con él? Pero un sentimiento de culpabilidad en lo más hondo de su conciencia le llenó de inquietud, y el silencio se le hizo intolerable; era como si los dos fueran a la deriva sobre una tabla después de un naufragio y evitaran mirarse.

Acabó pensando: «Soy un estúpido. ¿No he renunciado ya a cualquier esperanza? El matrimonio no me ha ayudado en nada, solo me ha dado preocupaciones». Y aquella noche dijo:

—Rosamond, ¿has oído algo que te haya entristecido?

—Sí —respondió ella, dejando la labor, en la que había estado trabajando lánguidamente, de manera casi maquinal, cosa nada frecuente en ella.

—¿Qué has oído?

—Todo, supongo. Papá me lo ha contado.

—¿Que la gente ya no me considera una persona honrada?

—Sí —dijo Rosamond, con voz muy baja, empezando a coser de nuevo maquinalmente.

Se produjo un silencio. Lydgate pensó: «Si tuviera un poco de confianza en mí… alguna idea de lo que soy, me diría que no cree que yo haya merecido esa deshonra».

Pero Rosamond, por su parte, siguió moviendo los dedos con languidez. Todo lo que hiciera falta decir al respecto esperaba que lo dijese Tertius. ¿Qué sabía ella? Y, si era inocente, ¿por qué no hacía algo por salvar su reputación?

El silencio de Rosamond añadió un nuevo poso de hiel a la amargura con que Lydgate se decía a sí

mismo que nadie creía en él… ni siquiera Farebrother había hecho nada por ayudarlo. El diálogo con su mujer no tenía otro propósito que disipar la fría niebla que se había interpuesto entre los dos, pero en seguida notó que su resolución se veía frenada por un desesperanzado resentimiento. Rosamond parecía creer que aquella dificultad, como todas las demás, solo la afectaba a ella. Él era siempre un ser aparte, que hacía lo que Rosamond no deseaba que hiciera. Lydgate se levantó de la silla movido por la cólera y, metiéndose las manos en los bolsillos, empezó a pasearse de un lado a otro de la habitación. A un nivel más profundo, mientras tanto, no dejaba de tener el convencimiento de que debía dominar su indignación y contárselo todo a Rosamond para que supiera la verdad. Porque casi había aprendido ya la lección de que tenía que plegarse a la manera de ser de su mujer y, puesto que ella siempre se quedaba corta en la comprensión, le tocaba a él aportarla en mayor cuantía. Pronto se reafirmó en el propósito de sincerarse: no había que perder aquella oportunidad. Si lograba hacerle comprender de manera un tanto solemne que había que enfrentarse a la calumnia en lugar de salir huyendo y que todo el problema había nacido de su desesperada necesidad de dinero, contaría con una ocasión única para exhortarla a que estuvieran unidos en la decisión de vivir más modestamente, a fin de poder capear el temporal y conservar la independencia. Hablaría de las medidas concretas que deseaba tomar, para lograr así su colaboración gustosa. No le quedaba más remedio que intentarlo… ¿qué otra cosa podía hacer?

No tuvo conciencia del tiempo que paseó intranquilo por la habitación, pero a Rosamond le pareció excesivo y deseó que se sentara. También ella había empezado a pensar que era una buena oportunidad para convencer a Lydgate de lo que tenía que hacer. Fuera cual fuese la verdad sobre aquellas calamidades, había una cosa que le inspiraba más temor que todo lo demás.

Lydgate se sentó por fin, no en una silla habitual, sino en otra más cercana a Rosamond, inclinándose hacia su mujer y mirándola gravemente antes de abordar de nuevo aquel triste asunto. Había logrado dominarse y se disponía a hablar, consciente de la solemnidad del momento, por tratarse de una ocasión que no se repetiría. Incluso había abierto la boca, cuando Rosamond, dejando caer las manos, lo miró y dijo:

—Al menos, Tertius…

—¿Sí?

—Al menos ahora habrás renunciado a la idea de seguir en Middlemarch. Yo no puedo continuar viviendo aquí. Vayámonos a Londres. Papá y todo el mundo opinan que será mejor que te vayas. Cualquier calamidad que tenga que soportar me resultará más llevadera lejos de aquí.

El desánimo de Lydgate fue muy profundo. En lugar de aquella confesión decisiva para la que haciendo un gran esfuerzo se había preparado, tenía que escuchar una vez más los mismos argumentos de siempre. No podía soportarlo. Con un rápido cambio de expresión se levantó de la silla y salió del cuarto.

Quizá si hubiese tenido fuerzas para perseverar en su resolución de aportar más, puesto que Rosamond siempre se quedaba corta, la velada habría tenido mejor desenlace. Si su energía le hubiera permitido superar aquel contratiempo, quizá podría haber influido en la voluntad y en la imaginación de su mujer. No tenemos la seguridad de que un determinado carácter, por inflexible o peculiar que sea, resista el efecto de una personalidad más sólida que la suya. Se le puede conquistar al asalto y quedar convertido por el momento, transformándose en parte del alma que lo rodea gracias al ardor de sus movimientos. Pero el pobre Lydgate tenía abierta una herida interior y le faltaba energía para abarcar la tarea.

El comienzo de una mutua comprensión y de una identidad de propósitos parecía tan remoto como siempre; más aún, daba la impresión de hallarse bloqueado por el convencimiento de la inutilidad de cualquier nuevo esfuerzo. Día a día, marido y mujer iban viviendo más lejos en espíritu el uno del otro: Lydgate realizando su trabajo con un sentimiento de desesperación y Rosamond convencida, con algo de razón, de que Tertius se portaba cruelmente. No servía de nada hablar con él, pero cuando llegara Will Ladislaw, estaba decidida a contárselo todo. A pesar de su innata reserva, Rosamond necesitaba que alguien estuviera al tanto de las injusticias cometidas con ella.

Capítulo LXXVI

A la misericordia, a la compasión, a la paz y al amor
todos rezan cuando están afligidos,
y a esas virtudes placenteras,
manifiestan su agradecimiento.

Porque la misericordia tiene corazón humano,
la compasión, un rostro humano;
el amor, la humana forma divina,
y la paz, el vestido humano.

WILLIAM BLAKE, *Cantos de inocencia*

Pocos días después Lydgate fue a Lowick Manor a petición de Dorothea. No se trataba de un llamamiento inesperado, ya que se produjo después de una carta del señor Bulstrode, en la que el banquero explicaba que había reanudado sus preparativos para abandonar Middlemarch y deseaba recordar a Lydgate sus recientes conversaciones acerca del hospital, ya que sus planes no se habían alterado. Bulstrode consideró deber suyo, antes de dar ningún nuevo paso, volver a tratar aquel asunto con la señora Casaubon, que insistió en discutirlo con Lydgate. «Es posible que los puntos de vista de usted hayan sufrido algún cambio —escribía el señor Bulstrode—; pero, en ese caso, también es conveniente que se lo exponga a ella».

Dorothea esperaba la llegada del médico con gran interés. Aunque, en consideración a sus consejeros varones, había renunciado a lo que sir James llamara «entrometerse en el asunto de Bulstrode», no se olvidaba de la difícil situación de Lydgate y, cuando el banquero acudió de nuevo en busca de ayuda para el hospital, consideró llegado el momento que se había visto obligada a posponer. En su lujoso hogar, paseándose bajo las ramas de los grandes árboles del parque, Dorothea ocupaba sus pensamientos con el destino de otros, sintiendo aprisionadas sus emociones. Hacer el bien que estuviera a su alcance «la obsesionaba como una pasión»[140] y cuando tenía una imagen nítida de las necesidades de otra persona anhelaba darles alivio, al mismo tiempo que su propio bienestar se le hacía insípido. Dorothea se sentía llena de confiada esperanza ante la entrevista con Lydgate, sin hacer caso de lo que se decía sobre su extraordinaria reserva y sin importarle tampoco su propia juventud. A Dorothea nada le parecía menos importante que la insistencia en sus pocos años y en su condición de mujer cuando se sentía impulsada a mostrarse solidaria con su prójimo.

Mientras esperaba en la biblioteca, no pudo hacer otra cosa que revivir las escenas que ligaban a Lydgate con sus recuerdos. Todas tenían que ver con su matrimonio y las dificultades que trajo consigo… aunque aquello no era del todo cierto; había dos ocasiones en las que la imagen de Lydgate estaba penosamente ligada con su mujer y otra persona. El dolor de Dorothea había encontrado alivio, pero el sufrimiento le había dejado cierta disponibilidad para imaginar lo que el matrimonio podía ser para Lydgate y una sensibilidad a flor de piel ante la menor insinuación acerca de Rosamond. Aquellos recuerdos eran como un drama para ella, y hacían que le brillaran los ojos y le llenaban de tensión el cuerpo entero, aunque se limitara a contemplar desde la biblioteca el césped y los brotes de vivo color verde que destacaban en relieve sobre los tonos más oscuros de los árboles de hoja perenne.

Al entrar Lydgate en la habitación, Dorothea casi se asustó ante la transformación de su rostro, porque para ella, que llevaba dos meses sin verlo, el cambio era sumamente perceptible, y no por la delgadez, sino

por la presencia constante del resentimiento y del desánimo, presencia que se refleja muy pronto hasta en los rostros de los jóvenes. La cordialidad de su mirada, cuando Dorothea le tendió la mano, dulcificó su expresión, pero tiñéndola tan solo de melancolía.

—Llevo mucho tiempo deseando verlo, señor Lydgate —dijo Dorothea cuando estuvieron sentados frente a frente—; pero he preferido no llamarlo hasta que el señor Bulstrode acudiera a mí de nuevo con motivo del hospital. Sé que las ventajas de mantener su administración separada de la administración de la enfermería dependen de usted o, por lo menos, de los beneficios que usted espera que se produzcan si continúa bajo su control. Y estoy segura de que no se negará a decirme exactamente lo que piensa.

—Quiere usted saber si debe hacer una generosa aportación al hospital —dijo Lydgate—. No puedo aconsejarle en conciencia que lo haga si necesita contar para ello con mi colaboración. Tal vez me vea obligado a abandonar la ciudad.

Habló con brusquedad, sintiendo vivamente el dolor de tener que renunciar a cualquier proyecto con el que Rosamond no estuviese de acuerdo.

—¿No será porque no haya nadie que crea en usted? —dijo Dorothea, con palabras que surgieron, impetuosas, de un corazón generoso—. Conozco los desdichados errores en los que se halla envuelto. Comprendí desde el primer momento que se trataba de una equivocación. Usted no ha cometido ninguna vileza. No sería capaz de hacer nada deshonroso.

Era la primera manifestación de confianza que recibía. Lydgate respiró hondo y dijo:

—Gracias.

No pudo decir nada más: era algo muy nuevo y sorprendente que aquellas pocas palabras en labios de una mujer significaran tanto para él.

—Le suplico que me cuente lo que sucedió —dijo Dorothea sin el menor temor—. Estoy segura de que la verdad le absolverá de toda culpa.

Lydgate se levantó de la silla, dirigiéndose hacia la ventana, olvidado de dónde estaba. Había examinado tantas veces a solas la posibilidad de explicarlo todo sin aportar datos que pudieran, quizá injustamente, perjudicar a Bulstrode, y había llegado tantas veces a una conclusión negativa —se había dicho con tanta frecuencia que sus afirmaciones no cambiarían la opinión de la gente—, que las palabras de Dorothea le sonaron como una tentación para hacer algo que en momentos de lucidez comprendía que no era razonable.

—Cuéntemelo, por favor —dijo Dorothea, con una seriedad llena de sencillez—; luego podremos hablar. Es inicuo permitir que la gente piense mal de alguien erróneamente cuando es posible evitarlo.

Lydgate se dio la vuelta, recordando dónde estaba y vio el rostro de Dorothea mirándole con dulce y confiada gravedad. La presencia de una persona noble, generosa en los deseos, ardiente en la caridad, cambia la luz que nos rodea: empezamos a ver de nuevo las verdaderas dimensiones de las cosas, más grandes y más tranquilas, y a creer que también nosotros podemos ser vistos y juzgados de acuerdo con la integridad de nuestro carácter. Esa influencia empezaba a dejarse sentir sobre Lydgate, que, durante muchos días, había visto la vida como alguien que es arrastrado y que se debate entre la multitud. Se sentó de nuevo y comprendió que estaba recobrando su antigua identidad por el hecho de hallarse con alguien que creía en él.

—No quiero —dijo— perjudicar a Bulstrode, que me ha prestado el dinero del que tan necesitado estaba… aunque ahora preferiría no haberlo recibido. Es un hombre perseguido y abrumado por la adversidad y solo le queda un débil hilo de vida. Pero me gustaría contárselo todo a usted. Será para mí un consuelo hablar, una vez que la confianza ha precedido a las explicaciones y que no parecerá ya que me limito a defender mi inocencia. Usted sabrá ser justa con otras personas como ha sabido serlo conmigo.

—Tenga confianza en mí —dijo Dorothea—; no contaré sin su permiso nada de lo que usted me diga. Pero, al menos, podré explicar que me ha aclarado todas las circunstancias de lo sucedido y que no es usted culpable en absoluto. El señor Farebrother me creerá, al igual que mi tío y sir James Chettam. Más aún, hay personas en Middlemarch a las que podría dirigirme; aunque no saben mucho de mí, me creerían. Sabrían que no puedo tener otro motivo para defenderle que la verdad y la justicia. Haré todo lo que sea preciso para demostrar su inocencia. Tengo muy pocas cosas que hacer y no podría dedicarme a nada mejor.

La voz de Dorothea, mientras hacía esta descripción infantil de sus propósitos, podría casi haberse tomado como prueba de que, efectivamente, estaba en su mano hacerlos realidad. La penetrante ternura de su entonación femenina parecía hecha para realizar una defensa frente a hábiles acusadores. Lydgate no se paró a pensar en que la actitud de la señora Casaubon era quijotesca: se entregó, por primera vez en su vida, a la sensación exquisita de apoyarse sin reservas en una comprensión generosa, sin ningún obstáculo de reserva orgullosa. Y se lo contó todo, desde el momento en que, apremiado por las dificultades, hizo de mala gana su primera petición a Bulstrode, hasta llegar de manera gradual, con el alivio de la palabra, a

una explicación más detallada de todo lo que se le había pasado por la cabeza… entrando de lleno en el hecho de que su tratamiento del enfermo se oponía a la práctica dominante, en sus dudas al final, en su idea de los deberes médicos y en su intranquilidad al pensar que el dinero había supuesto un cambio en sus inclinaciones personales y en su comportamiento profesional, aunque no en el cumplimiento de cualquier obligación públicamente reconocida.

—Después he sabido —añadió— que Hawley mandó a alguien a interrogar al ama de llaves de Stone Court y ella dijo que había dado al paciente todo el opio que había en el frasquito que yo dejé, así como una buena cantidad de aguardiente. Pero eso no habría sido contrario a las prescripciones habituales, incluso de profesionales de primera categoría. Las sospechas contra mí no tienen esa base: se apoyan en que acepté dinero, en que Bulstrode tenía razones poderosas para desear la muerte de aquel hombre y en que me dio las mil libras como soborno para colaborar con él en algún acto inmoral, o algo parecido, en contra del paciente… en que, en cualquier caso, acepté el soborno a cambio de cerrar la boca. Las sospechas son precisamente las que se mantienen vivas con mayor obstinación, porque responden a inclinaciones de la gente y no es posible refutarlas. Por qué se desobedecieron mis órdenes es una pregunta de la que ignoro la respuesta. Sigue siendo posible que Bulstrode fuese inocente de todo propósito criminal… incluso es posible que fuese ajeno a la desobediencia y se limitara a no mencionarlo. Pero todo eso no tiene nada que ver con lo que la gente cree. Se trata de uno de esos casos en los que se condena a un hombre por su reputación… se cree que, de algún modo poco preciso, ha cometido un delito, porque tenía motivos para hacerlo; y el descrédito de Bulstrode me ha envuelto a mí, porque acepté su dinero. Soy simplemente un apestado… algo así como una mazorca enferma en un maizal… El asunto está concluido y no se puede dar marcha atrás.

—¡Es muy duro! —dijo Dorothea—. Entiendo lo difícil que es su reivindicación. Pero es terrible que todo esto le suceda a usted, que se había propuesto llevar una vida por encima de lo común y descubrir mejores maneras de curar… Me resulta insoportable aceptarlo como algo inamovible. Sé que eran esos sus propósitos. Recuerdo lo que me dijo la primera vez que hablamos del hospital. No hay otro dolor sobre el que yo haya meditado tanto… el de amar lo que es grande, tratar de alcanzarlo y, sin embargo, fracasar.

—Sí —dijo Lydgate, sintiendo que había encontrado espacio para el pleno significado de su dolor—. Tenía ambiciones. Quería que conmigo todo fuera diferente. Me creía con más fuerza y habilidad. Pero los obstáculos más terribles son los que solo uno mismo es capaz de ver.

—Supongamos… —dijo Dorothea, con tono meditabundo—. Supongamos que el hospital siguiera de acuerdo con el plan presente y usted se quedara aquí, aunque apoyándose tan solo en la amistad y en la ayuda de unos pocos; en ese caso los sentimientos contra usted irían desapareciendo poco a poco; habría más oportunidades para que los habitantes de Middlemarch se vieran forzados a reconocer lo injusto de su actitud, porque verían la pureza de sus intenciones. Aún podría lograr la gran fama de Louis y de Laennec, esos grandes médicos de los que le he oído hablar, y todos estaríamos orgullosos de usted —concluyó con una sonrisa.

—Para eso necesitaría conservar la antigua confianza en mí mismo —dijo Lydgate tristemente—. Nada me molesta tanto como la idea de dar media vuelta y salir corriendo ante una calumnia, en lugar de enfrentarme a ella. Pero no puedo pedirle a nadie que dedique una gran cantidad de dinero a un plan que depende de mí.

—Yo creo que sí merece la pena, sin duda alguna —dijo Dorothea con sencillez—. Piense un momento. Me siento muy incómoda con mi dinero, porque me han dicho que no tengo lo suficiente para uno de los grandes proyectos que más me gustan y, sin embargo, me sobra la mayor parte. No sé qué hacer. Cuento con setecientas libras al año de mi fortuna personal, otras mil novecientas que me dejó el señor Casaubon y entre tres y cuatro mil en metálico en el banco. Deseaba obtener un préstamo, que luego devolvería gradualmente con la parte de mis ingresos que no necesito, y comprar con ese dinero tierras donde fundar un pueblo que fuese una escuela de laboriosidad; pero sir James y mi tío me han convencido de que los riesgos serían demasiado grandes. Ya ve usted que lo que más me alegraría sería hacer algo bueno con mi dinero: me gustaría que sirviera para mejorar la vida de otras personas. Me desasosiega mucho… que venga todo a mí cuando yo no lo quiero.

Una sonrisa logró romper la melancólica expresión de Lydgate. La infantil seriedad con que Dorothea decía todo aquello resultaba irresistible… y formaba una mezcla maravillosa con su rapidez para captar las experiencias más elevadas. (Sobre otras más vulgares, como las que desempeñan un papel protagonista en el mundo, la pobre señora Casaubon tenía un conocimiento muy borroso y miope, al que su imaginación prestaba muy poca ayuda). Pero Dorothea aceptó la sonrisa del médico como aliento para su plan.

—Creo que ahora se da usted cuenta de que antes hablaba con demasiados recelos —dijo, con tono persuasivo—. El hospital será una cosa buena; y que lleve usted una vida digna de ser vivida será otra.

La sonrisa de Lydgate había desaparecido.

—Usted posee la bondad y el dinero suficientes para hacer todo eso; si fuera posible hacerlo —dijo—. Pero…

El médico vaciló un momento, mirando vagamente hacia la ventana, y Dorothea esperó inmóvil. Finalmente Lydgate se volvió hacia ella y dijo de manera impetuosa:

—¿Por qué no tendría que decírselo? Usted sabe qué clase de vínculo es el matrimonio. Lo entenderá todo.

Dorothea sintió que el corazón le latía más deprisa. ¿También sufría Lydgate aquella tribulación? No se atrevió a hablar, y él continuó de inmediato.

—Ahora me es imposible dar ningún paso sin tener en cuenta la felicidad de mi mujer. Lo que me gustaría hacer si estuviera solo no tiene ya ningún valor en mi vida. No puedo verla sufrir. Se casó conmigo sin saber a qué riesgos se exponía, y quizá hubiera sido mejor para ella no hacerlo.

—Ya sé, ya sé… solo la apenaría si se viera obligado a ello —dijo Dorothea, con el vivo recuerdo de su propio pasado.

—Rosamond se opone a que nos quedemos en Middlemarch. Quiere marcharse. Las dificultades por las que ha pasado la han agotado mucho —continuó Lydgate, interrumpiéndose de nuevo, no fuese a decir demasiado.

—Pero cuando comprendiera todo lo bueno que podría suponer quedarse… —dijo Dorothea, con tono de reconvención, mirando a Lydgate como si su interlocutor hubiera olvidado las razones que acababan de considerar. El joven médico no habló de inmediato.

—No lo comprendería —dijo por fin, con frialdad, pensando, en un primer momento, que aquella afirmación tendría que aceptarse sin explicaciones—. Y, en realidad, yo ya no tengo ganas de continuar aquí. —Hizo una breve pausa y luego, siguiendo el impulso de dejar que Dorothea viese con mayor claridad los sinsabores de su existencia, dijo—: Sucede que este problema nuestro se le ha venido encima de una manera muy confusa. No hemos sido capaces de hablar de ello entre nosotros. No estoy seguro de lo que piensa: quizá teme que yo haya hecho realmente algo deshonroso. La culpa es mía; tendría que ser menos reservado. Pero mis sufrimientos han sido grandes.

—¿Puedo ir a verla? —dijo Dorothea, con vehemencia—. ¿Aceptaría mi comprensión? Le diría que nadie le juzga culpable excepto usted mismo. Le diría que su inocencia resplandecerá entre todas las personas honradas. Eso le alegrará el corazón. ¿Querrá usted preguntarle si me permite que vaya a visitarla? Ya nos hemos visto en otra ocasión.

—Estoy seguro de que puede usted hacerlo —dijo Lydgate, acogiendo la propuesta con cierta esperanza —. Se sentirá honrada… animada, creo, al comprobar que al menos usted siente algún respeto por mí. No le diré que se propone usted visitarla… para que no lo relacione en absoluto con mis deseos. Sé muy bien que no debería dejar que otras personas tuvieran que contarle nada, pero…

Lydgate se interrumpió y hubo un momento de silencio. Dorothea no dijo lo que estaba pensando: cómo sabía, por experiencia personal, que podían existir barreras invisibles entre marido y mujer. Se trataba de un punto en el que incluso la comprensión podía herir. La señora Casaubon volvió a los aspectos más externos de la situación de Lydgate, diciendo alegremente:

—Y si la señora Lydgate supiera que hay amigos dispuestos a creer en usted y a ayudarlo, quizá le parezca bien que siga en su puesto, que recupere sus esperanzas… y haga lo que se había propuesto hacer. Quizá entonces descubra usted que era acertado acceder a lo que le he propuesto. Estoy segura de que será así, si sigue viéndolo como un medio para lograr que sus conocimientos sean útiles a los demás.

Lydgate no contestó y Dorothea vio que libraba una lucha interior.

—No necesita decidirlo ahora mismo —dijo amablemente—. Pueden pasar unos días antes de que yo responda al señor Bulstrode.

Lydgate guardó silencio unos momentos más, pero finalmente se volvió para hablar con su tono más decidido.

—No; prefiero que no quede un intervalo que facilite las vacilaciones. No tengo ya suficiente seguridad en mí mismo… me refiero a mis posibilidades para la acción en las circunstancias actuales. Sería poco honesto permitir que otros se comprometieran a algo importante que dependiese de mí. Puede que me vea obligado a marcharme después de todo; veo muy pocas posibilidades de hacer otra cosa. Todo ello es demasiado problemático; no estoy dispuesto a ser la causa de que su bondad se desperdicie. No; dejemos que el hospital nuevo se una con la vieja enfermería y que todo siga como si yo no hubiera venido nunca a Middlemarch. He ido confeccionando un archivo bastante valioso desde que empecé a trabajar allí; se lo enviaré a alguien que pueda hacer uso de él —concluyó amargamente—. Durante una buena temporada

solo podré pensar en mejorar mis ingresos.

—Me duele mucho oírle hablar con tanta desesperanza —dijo Dorothea—. Sería una gran alegría que permitiera a sus amigos, que creen en su futuro, en su capacidad para hacer grandes cosas, evitarle todo eso. Piense en cuánto dinero tengo; me quitaría usted un peso de encima si aceptara una cantidad todos los años hasta verse libre de esa necesidad de incrementar sus ingresos que lo tiene encadenado. ¿Por qué no hacer cosas así? ¡Es tan difícil repartir con equidad! Sería una manera de lograrlo.

—¡Que Dios la bendiga, señora Casaubon! —dijo Lydgate, poniéndose en pie como animado por el mismo impulso que daba energía a sus palabras y descansando el brazo sobre el respaldo del gran sillón de cuero en el que había estado sentado—. Es bueno que tenga usted esos sentimientos. Pero no soy yo el hombre que debe beneficiarse de ellos. No doy suficientes garantías. No debo degradarme hasta el punto de aceptar una pensión por un trabajo inconcluso. Tengo muy claro que la única salida es irme de Middlemarch tan pronto como esté en mi mano hacerlo. En el mejor de los casos, aquí tardaría mucho tiempo en alcanzar unos ingresos aceptables y… será más fácil hacer los cambios necesarios en un sitio nuevo. He de ser como otras personas y pensar en lo que agrade al mundo y proporcione dinero; buscar una pequeña oportunidad entre los innumerables profesionales de Londres y abrirme camino; instalarme en algún balneario o ir a una ciudad del sur donde haya mucha gente que no haga nada y darme un poco de bombo: ese es el tipo de concha en el que debo introducirme sin perder por ello el alma.

—Pero no es valiente —dijo Dorothea— renunciar a la lucha.

—No, no es valiente —respondió Lydgate—, pero… ¿y si un hombre tiene miedo a la parálisis progresiva? —Luego, en otro tono—: Y, sin embargo, usted me ha dado valor creyendo en mí. Todo me parece más soportable después de hablar con usted; y, si es capaz de convencer de mi inocencia a unas cuantas personas, sobre todo a Farebrother, le estaré profundamente agradecido. Pero no mencione que se desobedecieron mis instrucciones. Eso se podría interpretar mal con demasiada facilidad. Después de todo, no hay otra prueba a mi favor que la opinión que se tuviera antes de mí. Usted solo puede decir lo que yo le he contado.

—El señor Farebrother lo creerá… también otras personas —respondió Dorothea—. Está en mi mano decir cosas de usted que demuestren lo estúpido que es suponer que se le puede sobornar.

—No lo sé —dijo Lydgate, con algo semejante a un gemido en la voz—. Todavía no he aceptado ningún soborno. Pero existe una pálida sombra de soborno en lo que a veces se llama prosperidad. ¿Me hará usted entonces otro gran favor, e irá a ver a mi mujer?

—Sí, iré. Recuerdo lo bonita que es —dijo Dorothea, en quien todas las impresiones sobre Rosamond habían calado muy hondo—. Espero serle simpática.

Mientras Lydgate volvía hacia Middlemarch, iba pensando: «Esta joven criatura tiene un corazón tan grande como el de la Virgen María. Es evidente que no piensa en su propio futuro y comprometería la mitad de sus ingresos sin pensarlo dos veces, como si tan solo quisiera para sí una silla donde sentarse y desde donde mirar con esos ojos suyos tan claros a los pobres mortales que vienen a rezarle. Parece tener lo que nunca he visto antes en ninguna mujer: una fuente de amistad para los seres humanos… Los hombres pueden ser amigos suyos. Casaubon debió de desatar en ella alguna alucinación heroica. Me pregunto si podría tener otro tipo de pasión por un hombre. ¿Ladislaw? Existía sin duda un sentimiento poco común entre los dos. Y Casaubon debió de advertirlo. Bueno… podría ayudar más a un hombre con su amor que con su dinero».

A Dorothea, por su parte, se le ocurrió de inmediato el plan de liberar a Lydgate de su deuda con Bulstrode, convencida de que era una parte, aunque pequeña, de las presiones que soportaba. Se sentó al instante, inspirada por la entrevista con el médico, y escribió una breve nota, en la que afirmaba tener más derecho que el señor Bulstrode a proporcionar el dinero necesario para equilibrar la economía de Lydgate… que sería cruel por su parte no permitirle que lo ayudara en aquel asunto de tan escasa importancia, ya que se trataba de un favor para ella, que tenía tan pocas obligaciones concretas que atender con el dinero que le sobraba. Lydgate podía calificarla de acreedora o darle cualquier otro nombre que quisiera si ello implicaba la aceptación de su solicitud. Puso en el sobre un talón de mil libras y decidió llevar la carta consigo al día siguiente, cuando fuera a ver a Rosamond.

Capítulo LXXVII

> Y así tu caída ha dejado algo semejante a una mancha
> que hace, incluso al hombre mejor dotado y más formado,
> sospechoso.
>
> *Enrique V*

Al día siguiente Lydgate tenía que ir a Brassing y le dijo a su mujer que no volvería hasta la noche. En los últimos tiempos Rosamond no salía más allá del jardín, excepto para ir a la iglesia y, en una ocasión, para ver a su padre, a quien preguntó:

—Si Tertius se marcha, nos ayudarás con la mudanza, ¿verdad, papá? Supongo que tendremos muy poco dinero. Espero que alguien nos ayude.

Y el señor Vincy respondió:

—Sí, hija mía, no me importan cien o doscientas libras. No es como echar dinero en un saco sin fondo.

Con esas excepciones, Rosamond se había quedado en casa, en un ambiente de melancolía y de lánguida ansiedad, pendiente de la visita de Ladislaw como punto de esperanza e interés, y asociando aquel acontecimiento con nuevas exhortaciones para que Lydgate dejara Middlemarch cuanto antes y se instalara en Londres; había llegado a convencerse de que la llegada de Will tendría una decisiva importancia sobre su marcha, aunque sin saber exactamente por qué. Esa manera de establecer relaciones es demasiado común para considerarla una locura peculiar de Rosamond. Y es precisamente este tipo de encadenamiento el que produce mayores sobresaltos cuando se rompe: porque entender una relación de causa y efecto significa con frecuencia advertir posibles fallos y obstáculos; pero si solo se ve la causa e inmediatamente a su lado el efecto deseado, desaparecen las dudas y nos dejamos arrastrar por la intuición. Eso era lo que sucedía con la pobre Rosamond mientras arreglaba los objetos de la casa con el mismo primor de siempre, aunque con mayor lentitud; o se sentaba al piano, con intención de tocar, pero desistía en seguida, sin abandonar por ello el taburete, con los dedos inmóviles sobre la tapa de madera y mirando sin ver, envuelta en nebuloso hastío. Su melancolía era tan marcada que Lydgate sentía una extraña timidez ante ella, como si su actitud fuera un perpetuo reproche silencioso, por lo que aquel hombre enérgico, dominado por su viva percepción de la criatura frágil y hermosa cuya existencia le parecía, en cierto sentido, haber quebrado, se encogía ante su mirada y a veces se sobresaltaba al oírla acercarse, sintiéndose aún más temeroso de ella y de su repentina irrupción, si poco antes el miedo había sido expulsado momentáneamente por la exasperación.

Aquella mañana Rosamond bajó de su cuarto en el piso alto —donde a veces pasaba todo el día cuando Lydgate salía— dispuesta a dar un paseo por la ciudad. Tenía que echar una carta al correo; una carta dirigida al señor Ladislaw y escrita con encantadora discreción, pero encaminada a acelerar su llegada, insinuando la existencia de dificultades. La doncella, la única criada que tenía ahora para atender la casa, la vio bajar con su traje de calle y pensó que «nadie había estado nunca tan bonita con un sombrero, pobrecilla».

En la cabeza de Dorothea, mientras tanto, solo había sitio para el proyecto de ir a ver a Rosamond y para la multitud de imágenes, tanto del pasado como del futuro probable, que se reunían en torno a la perspectiva de aquella visita. Hasta el día anterior, en que Lydgate le había permitido entrever un mal momento en su vida matrimonial, la imagen de la señora Lydgate había estado siempre asociada para ella con la de Will Ladislaw. Hasta en sus horas de mayor desasosiego —incluso cuando tanto le habían perturbado las habladurías repetidas con tan doloroso lujo de detalles por la señora Cadwallader—, sus

esfuerzos, más aún, su impulso más inmediato, había sido rechazar cualquier suposición deshonrosa sobre Will; y cuando, en su posterior entrevista con él, interpretó al principio sus palabras como alusión a un sentimiento por la señora Lydgate que estaba decidido a cortar, Dorothea había tenido una rápida visión, triste y benévola al mismo tiempo, de las satisfacciones que le habría proporcionado disfrutar a menudo de la compañía de una criatura tan hermosa, que muy probablemente compartía sus otras aficiones además de la música. Pero luego vinieron sus palabras antes de marcharse, las breves palabras apasionadas con que había dejado traslucir que era ella, Dorothea, el objeto del que su amor le obligaba a apartarse; que era únicamente su amor por ella lo que estaba decidido a no declarar y a llevarse al destierro. Desde aquella despedida, Dorothea, segura del amor de Will, orgullosa de su delicado sentido del honor y de su firme voluntad de que nadie pudiera acusarle con razón, se sentía completamente tranquila en cuanto a su interés por la señora Lydgate. Estaba segura de que en aquel interés no había rastro alguno de culpa.

Hay personas cuyo amor, si nos aman, supone para nosotros algo semejante a un bautismo y a una consagración: nos liga a la rectitud y a la pureza por la completa fe que tienen en nosotros, por lo que nuestros pecados se convierten en esa gravísima especie de sacrilegio que derriba el altar invisible de la confianza. «Si tú no eres bueno, nadie es bueno»: estas pocas palabras pueden dar un terrible significado a la responsabilidad y dan una intensidad vitriólica al remordimiento.

La personalidad de Dorothea era de ese tipo: sus propias faltas apasionadas corrían por los canales abiertos y fácilmente perceptibles de su carácter ardiente; y mientras se compadecía de las equivocaciones visibles de otros, carecía en su experiencia interior de elementos para sospechas sutiles y para interpretaciones sobre maldades ocultas. Esa simplicidad suya, que mantenía vivos los ideales de otros por su fe en esas personas, era una de las grandes fuerzas de su feminidad. Y había tenido desde el principio un tremendo efecto sobre Will Ladislaw, quien sintió, al separarse de ella, que las breves palabras con que había tratado de comunicarle sus sentimientos y el abismo que su fortuna abría entre ellos, resultarían aún más elocuentes por su brevedad cuando Dorothea se detuviera a interpretarlas: Will estaba seguro de que nadie lo valoraba más que ella.

Y en eso tenía toda la razón. Durante los meses de alejamiento, Dorothea había sentido un sosiego delicioso, aunque triste, en su mutuo afecto, por lo que tenía de plenitud interior y porque nada lo había empañado. Dorothea era muy capaz de enfrentarse a otros cuando tenía que salir en defensa de planes o de personas en los que creía; y las injusticias que, en su opinión, su marido había cometido con Will, y las circunstancias externas que servían a otros para justificar su desprecio, solo contribuían a hacer aún más tenaces su afecto y sus juicios admirativos. Y ahora, con las revelaciones sobre Bulstrode, había surgido otro hecho que afectaba a la posición social de Will y que despertaba de nuevo la resistencia interior de Dorothea a lo que se decía de él en aquella parte de su mundo que quedaba encerrada dentro de las verjas de los parques.

«El joven Ladislaw, nieto de un judío prestamista y ladrón», frase que se había pronunciado de manera categórica en todos los diálogos sobre el asunto Bulstrode en Lowick, Tipton y Freshitt, era una descripción todavía más desfavorable que la de «italiano domador de ratones blancos». Sir James Chettam estaba convencido de la rectitud de su satisfacción cuando pensaba con cierta complacencia en que aquello suponía una legua más en la inconmensurable distancia entre Ladislaw y Dorothea, permitiéndole desechar por demasiado absurda cualquier preocupación al respecto. Y quizá había encontrado incluso cierto placer en llamar la atención del señor Brooke sobre tan feo punto en la genealogía de Ladislaw, para que le sirviera de vela recién encendida con que iluminar su propia insensatez. Dorothea advirtió en más de una ocasión la animosidad con que se mencionaba la parte de Will en la penosa historia; ella no había dicho una sola palabra, sintiéndose ahora impedida, como no le sucedía antes al hablar de Will, por la conciencia de que existía entre ellos una relación más profunda que debía ser siempre un secreto sagrado. Pero su silencio servía para envolver su perseverante afecto con un brillo más intenso; y aquella desgracia en el sino de Will que, al parecer, otros querían echarle sobre las espaldas como un oprobio, solo servía para añadir un poco más de entusiasmo a su constante solicitud por él.

Dorothea no acariciaba visiones de una mayor unión ente los dos, aunque eso no implicara tampoco una postura de renuncia. Había aceptado su relación con Will como parte de sus tribulaciones matrimoniales y le habría parecido pecaminoso quejarse interiormente de no ser completamente feliz, ya que se sentía más inclinada a ver los privilegios que conllevaba su situación. Soportaba bien que los principales desahogos de su ternura no fuesen más que recuerdos del pasado, y la idea del matrimonio solo se le ocurría como desagradable propuesta por parte de algún pretendiente de quien nada sabía por el momento, pero cuyos méritos, tal como los vería su familia, serían una fuente de tormentos para ella: «Alguien que administre tus propiedades por ti, Dorothea» era la atractiva sugerencia del señor Brooke en cuanto a las características

idóneas del supuesto candidato. «Preferiría administrarlas yo misma si supiera qué hacer con ellas», respondía la señora Casaubon. No; seguía firme en su declaración de que no volvería a casarse y de que en el largo valle de su vida, que parecía tan llano y tan carente de mojones, la dirección surgiría mientras avanzaba por el camino y veía al pasar a sus compañeros de viaje.

Aquel habitual estado de ánimo a propósito de Will Ladislaw había adquirido especial fuerza durante las muchas horas de vigilia transcurridas desde que se propuso hacer una visita a la señora Lydgate, y formaba algo semejante a un fondo sobre el que veía la figura de Rosamond, que se le presentaba sin el menor inconveniente como objeto de su interés y de su compasión. Existía evidentemente cierta distancia mental, ciertas barreras que impedían la completa confianza entre aquella esposa y el marido que había convertido en ley su felicidad. Era un asunto que ninguna tercera persona podía tocar directamente. Pero Dorothea pensó con honda piedad en la soledad que había caído como una nube sobre Rosamond por las sospechas arrojadas sobre su marido; y podría sin duda ayudarla con su manifestación de respeto por Lydgate y de simpatía hacia ella.

«Le hablaré de su marido», pensaba Dorothea, mientras iba en el coche camino de la ciudad. La luminosa mañana de primavera, el aroma de la tierra húmeda, las hojas nuevas que mostraban su abundancia de verdor, todavía semioculta, en las vainas a medio abrir, parecían parte del júbilo que la señora Casaubon experimentaba después de una larga conversación con el señor Farebrother, que había aceptado con alegría la explicación que justificaba la conducta de Lydgate. «Voy a llevar buenas noticias a la señora Lydgate y quizá quiera hablar conmigo y lleguemos a ser amigas».

Dorothea iba también a hacer otro encargo en Lowick Gate: se trataba de una campana nueva para la escuela y, como tuvo que apearse del coche muy cerca de la casa de Lydgate, fue andando hasta allí atravesando la calle, después de decirle al cochero que esperase a que trajeran unos paquetes. La puerta estaba abierta y la criada, que aprovechaba la oportunidad para contemplar el coche que se había parado tan cerca, tardó un poco en darse cuenta de que la señora que se había apeado del vehículo venía hacia ella.

—¿Está en casa la señora Lydgate? —dijo Dorothea.

—No estoy segura, milady; voy a verlo, si hace usted el favor de entrar —dijo Martha, un poco desconcertada en razón del delantal de cocina que llevaba puesto, pero con la suficiente sangre fría para estar segura de que «señora» no era el tratamiento adecuado para aquella joven viuda de porte regio con coche y una pareja de caballos—. Haga el favor de entrar, e iré a verlo.

—Diga que soy la señora Casaubon —explicó Dorothea, mientras Martha se adelantaba con ánimo de llevarla a la sala y subir después al piso alto para ver si Rosamond había vuelto de su paseo.

Cruzaron la parte más ancha del vestíbulo y torcieron por el pasillo que llevaba al jardín. La puerta de la sala tenía quitado el pasador y Martha, empujándola sin mirar dentro, esperó a que entrara la señora Casaubon, y salió a continuación, mientras la puerta, que se había abierto sin hacer el menor ruido, volvía a cerrarse de la misma manera.

Aquella mañana Dorothea veía peor que de costumbre, porque su cabeza estaba llena de imágenes de las cosas tal como habían sido y como iban a ser. Se encontró al lado de la puerta sin ver nada notable, pero inmediatamente oyó a alguien que hablaba en voz baja y que la sobresaltó; tuvo la sensación de soñar despierta y, al avanzar mecánicamente un paso o dos, más allá del lateral sobresaliente de una estantería para libros, vio, con la terrible iluminación de una certeza que destacaba todos los contornos, algo que la paralizó y la privó del autodominio necesario para hablar.

Sentado de espaldas en un sofá pegado a la pared, en línea con la puerta por donde había entrado, vio a Will Ladislaw: muy cerca y vuelta hacia él, con un desconsuelo que daba un brillo nuevo a su rostro, se encontraba Rosamond, con el sombrero hacia atrás, mientras Will, inclinado sobre ella, le estrechaba las manos y hablaba con vehemencia.

Rosamond, en su emocionado ensimismamiento, no había reparado en la figura que avanzaba en silencio; pero cuando Dorothea, después del primer instante inconmensurable de aquella visión, retrocedió atropelladamente hasta tropezar con algún mueble, Rosamond tomó conciencia de que estaba allí y, con un movimiento brusco, apartó las manos y se puso en pie, mirando a Dorothea, que no tuvo más remedio que detenerse. Will Ladislaw, alzándose también, volvió la cabeza y, al encontrar los ojos de Dorothea y un desconocido relampagueo en ellos, pareció convertirse en estatua de mármol. La señora Casaubon dirigió en seguida la mirada hacia Rosamond y dijo con voz firme:

—Perdóneme, señora Lydgate, la criada no sabía que estaba usted aquí. He venido a traer una carta muy importante para su marido y quería entregársela a usted en propia mano.

Dejó la carta sobre la mesita que había impedido su retroceso y luego, abarcando a Rosamond y a Will en una fría mirada y una inclinación de cabeza, salió rápidamente de la habitación; en el pasillo se encontró

a la sorprendida Martha, que dijo sentir que la señora Lydgate no estuviese en casa y luego acompañó a la extraña dama hasta la puerta, haciéndose la reflexión de que las personas de alcurnia eran probablemente más impacientes que el resto de los mortales.

Dorothea cruzó la calle con su paso más elástico y muy pronto estuvo otra vez dentro del coche.

—Lléveme a Freshitt Hall —le dijo al cochero, y cualquiera que la hubiese visto podría haber pensado que, a pesar de estar más pálida de lo normal, nunca la había animado una energía tan serena. Y eso era realmente lo que sentía; era como si hubiera bebido un gran trago de desprecio que la inmunizase contra todo. Había visto algo tan increíble que sus emociones se alejaron de allí a toda velocidad, formando una confusa multitud sin norte. Dorothea necesitaba una actividad donde volcar su agitación. Se sentía con fuerzas para andar y trabajar durante un día sin comer ni beber. Y daría cumplimiento a la misión que se había propuesto realizar por la mañana, la de ir a Freshitt y a Tipton para comunicar a sir James y a su tío todo lo que quería que supieran sobre Lydgate, cuya soledad matrimonial ante la tribulación adquiría ahora para ella una nueva significación y hacía aún más ardiente el deseo de ser su adalid. Durante los forcejeos de su vida matrimonial nunca sintió nada semejante a aquella triunfante capacidad de indignación, porque entonces siempre había una rápida punzada de arrepentimiento que todo lo amortiguaba; y Dorothea lo interpretó como un signo de renovada fortaleza.

—Dodo, ¡cómo te brillan los ojos! —dijo Celia, cuando sir James hubo salido de la habitación—. Y no ves nada de lo que miras, ni a Arthur ni ninguna otra cosa. Vas a hacer algo desagradable, estoy segura. ¿Tiene relación con el señor Lydgate o ha sucedido algo nuevo? —Celia estaba acostumbrada a mantenerse siempre a la expectativa con su hermana.

—Sí, Kitty, han pasado muchísimas cosas —dijo Dorothea, con su voz más grave.

—Me gustaría saber qué —dijo Celia, cruzando los brazos cómodamente e inclinándose hacia adelante.

—Todos los problemas de todas las personas sobre la faz de la tierra —dijo Dorothea, alzando los brazos hasta colocarlos detrás de la cabeza.

—¡Dios bendito, Dodo! ¿Es que vas a hacer un plan para solucionarlos todos? —dijo Celia, un poco intranquila ante aquel desvarío al estilo de Hamlet.

Pero sir James volvió a entrar, dispuesto a acompañar a su cuñada a Tipton Grange, con lo que la expedición de Dorothea terminó bien, y no se desvió de su resolución hasta que se apeó del coche a la puerta de su casa.

Capítulo LXXVIII

> Ojalá fuese ayer y estuviera yo en la tumba,
> con su dulce fe como lápida.

Rosamond y Will se quedaron inmóviles —no supieron cuánto tiempo—, él contemplando el sitio donde había estado Dorothea y ella mirándolo con expresión dubitativa. A Rosamond, que en lo más profundo de su alma estaba más satisfecha que disgustada por lo que acababa de ocurrir, aquella pausa se le hizo interminable. Los caracteres superficiales sueñan con dominar fácilmente las emociones de otros, confiando implícitamente en su mezquino encanto para desviar las corrientes más profundas, y seguros de dotar de realidad, mediante gestos y observaciones elegantes, a cosas inexistentes. Rosamond sabía que Will había recibido un golpe terrible, pero tenía muy poca costumbre de imaginar los estados de ánimo de otras personas, excepto como material moldeado por sus propios deseos, y creía en su poder para consolar o para dominar. Incluso Tertius, el más perverso de los hombres, a la larga siempre terminaba por ceder. Los acontecimientos se mostraban más obstinados, pero Rosamond aún habría seguido diciendo en aquel momento, como antes de su matrimonio, que nunca renunciaba a lo que se había propuesto.

Extendió el brazo y posó suavemente los dedos sobre el brazo de Will.

—¡No me toque! —dijo él, haciendo que las palabras restallaran como látigos, apartándose de ella, enrojeciendo y palideciendo y volviendo a enrojecer, como si todo su organismo se estremeciera con el dolor de la picadura. Se volvió al llegar al otro extremo de la habitación, deteniéndose frente a Rosamond, con las puntas de los dedos en los bolsillos, la cabeza erguida y una mirada feroz que iba dirigida, no a ella, sino a un punto a pocos centímetros.

Rosamond se sintió vivamente ofendida, pero su manera de expresarlo fue tan peculiar que solo Lydgate se hubiera dado cuenta de su significado, ya que manifestó de repente una gran calma, se sentó, se desató el sombrero que llevaba echado hacia atrás y lo dejó a un lado junto con el chal. Sus manos estaban muy frías cuando las entrelazó modestamente sobre el regazo.

Para Will hubiera sido más conveniente recoger el sombrero y marcharse; pero no sentía deseos de hacerlo; notaba por el contrario una terrible inclinación a quedarse y a despedazar a Rosamond con su cólera. Le parecía tan imposible soportar la desgracia que ella había atraído sobre él sin desahogar su furia, como que una pantera herida dejara de saltar y de morder. Y, sin embargo… ¿cómo decir a una mujer que deseaba maldecirla? Sintió que se rebelaba bajo el peso de unas convenciones sociales que estaba obligado a respetar; y se hallaba en un peligroso e inestable equilibrio cuando la voz de Rosamond aportó la vibración decisiva.

—Todavía está usted a tiempo de ir tras la señora Casaubon y explicarle sus preferencias —dijo con aflautada entonación sarcástica.

—¿Ir tras ella? —estalló Will, con voz cortante—. ¿Cree usted que se volvería a mirarme o daría más valor a lo que yo pudiera decir que a un montón de basura? ¡Explicar! ¿Cómo puede disculparse un hombre a expensas de una mujer?

—Puede usted contarle lo que le apetezca —dijo Rosamond con voz temblorosa.

—¿Supone que me miraría con mejores ojos por sacrificarla a usted? No se sentirá halagada porque yo me muestre despreciable a sus ojos… ni confiará en mí si yo me comporto como un cobarde.

Will empezó a moverse de un lado para otro con el desasosiego de un animal salvaje que ve una presa y no puede alcanzarla. En seguida estalló de nuevo:

—Antes no tenía esperanzas… no muchas… de que llegara a suceder algo mejor. Pero poseía una certeza… la de que ella creía en mí. A pesar de lo que la gente dijera o hiciese, ella seguía creyendo… ¡Eso se ha acabado! Pensará ya para siempre que no soy más que un hipócrita… demasiado delicado para aceptar el cielo excepto en condiciones muy halagüeñas y, sin embargo, capaz de venderme a escondidas por cualquier fruslería. Pensará en mí como un insulto hecho carne desde el primer momento en que nos…

Will se detuvo como si se hubiera descubierto empuñando algo que no había que tirar ni romper. Encontró otra salida para su rabia recogiendo de nuevo las palabras de Rosamond, como si fueran reptiles que había que estrangular para deshacerse cuanto antes de ellos.

—¡Explicar! ¡Decir a un hombre que explique cómo ha ido a parar al infierno! ¡Explicar mis preferencias! Nunca he sentido preferencia por ella, como tampoco siento preferencia por respirar. A su lado las demás mujeres no existen. Antes tocaría su mano si estuviera muerta que la de cualquier otra mujer viva.

Rosamond, mientras le arrojaban aquellas armas envenenadas, estaba casi perdiendo el sentido de la propia identidad y le parecía despertar a una nueva y terrible existencia. No sentía la firme y helada repugnancia, la actitud de superioridad y autocontrol que había sido siempre su respuesta ante las más violentas demostraciones de desagrado de Lydgate: toda su sensibilidad estaba concentrada en un dolor desconcertante completamente nuevo; se estremecía, aterrada, bajo un látigo desconocido. La animadversión de otra persona se le estaba grabando en la conciencia a fuego y a mordiscos. Cuando Will terminó de hablar, Rosamond se había convertido en la imagen de la aflicción: sus labios habían perdido todo el color y en sus ojos había una consternación sin lágrimas. Si hubiera sido Tertius el que se encontrara frente a ella, su expresión de sufrimiento le hubiese causado un dolor muy agudo y se hubiera arrodillado a su lado para consolarla, ofreciéndole el refugio de aquellos firmes brazos suyos que con tanta frecuencia Rosamond había despreciado.

Hay que perdonarle a Will que no tuviera semejante impulso de compasión. Nunca se había sentido vinculado a aquella mujer que acababa de echar a perder el tesoro más importante de su vida, siendo él completamente inocente. Se sabía cruel, pero le era imposible aplacarse.

Después de hablar, aún siguió moviéndose por la habitación, ausente a medias en espíritu, mientras Rosamond permanecía inmóvil. Will, al fin, pareciendo recobrarse, cogió el sombrero, pero se quedó unos momentos indeciso. Había hablado a Rosamond de una manera que hacía difícil pronunciar cualquier frase de cortesía; y, sin embargo, al llegar el momento de marcharse sin decir una palabra más, no pudo hacerlo porque habría sido demasiado brutal; se sintió frenado y desconcertado en su indignación. Se dirigió hacia la repisa de la chimenea, apoyó un brazo en ella y esperó en silencio a… difícilmente sabría decir qué. El fuego vengativo aún ardía dentro de él y no estaba en condiciones de disculparse; tenía sin embargo muy presente que, al volver a aquel hogar en el que disfrutara de amistad tan satisfactoria, había encontrado la calamidad esperándole… le había sido revelado de repente un obstáculo que surgía tanto dentro como fuera del hogar. Y lo que parecía un presentimiento hacía lentamente presión sobre él como con unas tenazas: la posibilidad de que su vida se viera esclavizada por aquella mujer desvalida que se había arrojado sobre él impulsada por la deprimente tristeza que le llenaba el corazón. Se rebeló contra aquel hecho que su rápida capacidad de percepción le anunciaba y, cuando sus ojos se posaron sobre el desencajado rostro de Rosamond, le pareció que, de los dos, era él el más merecedor de compasión; porque el dolor tiene que ser entronizado por la memoria antes de transformarse en compasión.

Así estuvieron durante unos minutos, frente a frente, muy apartados el uno del otro y en silencio; el rostro de Will, dominado aún por una rabia sorda y el de Rosamond por un dolor sin palabras. La pobre criatura carecía de fuerzas para responder con el menor gesto apasionado; el terrible hundimiento de la ilusión que había polarizado todas sus esperanzas era un golpe demasiado duro: su pequeño mundo estaba en ruinas y ella se tambaleaba en el centro como una conciencia solitaria y perpleja.

Will deseaba que ella hablara y quitase un poco de hierro a sus crueles palabras, que parecían interponerse entre los dos, como burlándose de antemano de cualquier intento por revivir su amistad. Pero Rosamond no dijo nada y, por fin, haciendo un esfuerzo desesperado, Will preguntó:

—¿Debo venir a ver a Lydgate esta noche?

—Si le apetece —respondió Rosamond, con voz apenas audible.

A continuación Will abandonó la casa, sin que Martha se enterase de que había estado en ella.

Después de salir Ladislaw, Rosamond trató de levantarse del asiento, pero tuvo que recostarse, sintiendo que perdía el conocimiento. Cuando se recuperó de nuevo, se encontraba demasiado enferma para hacer el esfuerzo de ponerse en pie y tocar la campanilla, y allí se quedó, desvalida, hasta que la doncella, sorprendida por su larga ausencia, pensó por primera vez en buscarla por las habitaciones del piso bajo.

Rosamond le explicó que se había sentido enferma y mareada de repente y le pidió que la ayudara a subir la escalera. Al llegar a su cuarto se echó sobre la cama sin quitarse la ropa y permaneció allí, adormilada en apariencia, como ya hiciera otra vez en un memorable día de aflicción.

Lydgate volvió a casa antes de lo que esperaba, a eso de las cinco y media, y allí la encontró. El convencimiento de que su mujer estaba enferma hizo que cualquier otra idea pasara a segundo término. Cuando le tomó el pulso, los ojos de Rosamond se posaron sobre él con más insistencia que desde hacía mucho tiempo, como si verlo a su lado le causara cierta satisfacción. Lydgate advirtió en seguida el cambio y, sentándose junto a ella, la rodeó suavemente con un brazo, e inclinándose le dijo:

—¡Mi pobre Rosamond! ¿Es que algo te ha inquietado?

Agarrándose a su marido, Rosamond estalló en sollozos y gritos histéricos y durante una hora Lydgate no hizo más que consolarla y atenderla. Imaginó que Dorothea había ido a verla y que el impacto sobre su sistema nervioso, que evidentemente incluía un cambio de actitud hacia él, se debía a las impresiones causadas por la visita.

Capítulo LXXIX

> Vi en el sueño que, precisamente cuando terminaron de hablar, se estaban acercando a un pantano muy cenagoso que se hallaba en medio de la llanura; y los dos, por descuido, cayeron de repente en la ciénaga. El nombre del pantano era Desánimo.
>
> BUNYAN

Cuando Rosamond se tranquilizó, Lydgate la dejó sola, confiando en que un calmante le facilitara el sueño y, al bajar al salón a recoger un libro que había dejado allí, con intención de pasar la velada en su cuarto de trabajo, vio sobre la mesa la carta de Dorothea. No se había atrevido a preguntarle a su mujer por la visita de la señora Casaubon, pero la lectura de la carta desvaneció cualquier duda, porque Dorothea mencionaba que iba a llevarla en propia mano.

Cuando Will Ladislaw llegó un poco más tarde, Lydgate se sorprendió tanto que quedó clara su ignorancia sobre la visita matutina y Will no podía preguntar: «¿No le ha dicho la señora Lydgate que he venido esta mañana?».

—La pobre Rosamond está enferma —explicó Lydgate después de las primeras palabras de bienvenida.

—Nada serio, espero —dijo Will.

—No… tan solo un leve trastorno nervioso… consecuencia de alguna emoción. Ha estado muy preocupada últimamente. La verdad es, Ladislaw, que tengo muy mala suerte. Hemos pasado varios círculos de purgatorio desde que usted se fue y últimamente he tropezado con un filón mucho peor que todo lo anterior. Supongo que acaba usted de llegar… Parece bastante cansado… no lleva el tiempo suficiente en la ciudad para haber oído nada.

—Después de una noche de viaje, he llegado esta mañana a las ocho al Ciervo Blanco. Luego me he encerrado en mi cuarto y he descansado —dijo Will, sintiéndose un completo hipócrita, pero sin ver alternativa posible a aquella mentira.

A continuación escuchó el relato de Lydgate sobre los aprietos que su mujer le había descrito a su manera. Rosamond no había mencionado el hecho de que el nombre de Will estuviera vinculado a la historia que ya era del dominio público —se trataba de un detalle que no la afectaba de manera directa— y Will lo escuchó ahora por primera vez.

—He pensado que sería mejor decirle que su nombre se ha visto mezclado en este asunto —dijo Lydgate, que entendía mejor que la mayoría de los hombres lo mucho que a Ladislaw podía dolerle aquello—. Tengo la seguridad de que lo oirá tan pronto como entre en contacto con la ciudad. Supongo que es cierto que Raffles habló con usted.

—Sí —dijo Will, sardónicamente—. Tendré mucha suerte si las habladurías no me convierten en la persona más desprestigiada de todas las que han intervenido en esto. La última versión podría ser, por ejemplo, que tramé con Raffles el asesinato de Bulstrode y que escapé de Middlemarch por ese motivo.

Mientras tanto pensaba: «He aquí un nuevo timbre de gloria que hará mi nombre más grato a los oídos de Dorothea; pero… ¿qué importancia tiene ya eso?».

Will no dijo nada, sin embargo, del ofrecimiento que le hizo Bulstrode. Ladislaw era muy poco reticente en sus asuntos personales, pero uno de los rasgos más destacados en el modelado que le había dado la naturaleza era la delicada generosidad que le llevó a mostrarse reservado en esta ocasión. No quiso decir que había rechazado el dinero de Bulstrode precisamente al enterarse de que la causa del desastre de Lydgate había sido aceptarlo.

Tampoco Lydgate se mostró muy comunicativo. No aludió a la actitud de Rosamond ante su situación, y de Dorothea dijo tan solo: «La señora Casaubon ha sido la única persona que se ha adelantado para decir que no creía ninguna de las acusaciones contra mí». Al notar un cambio en el rostro de Will, evitó mencionarla de nuevo, sintiéndose demasiado ignorante de las relaciones entre los dos para estar seguro de que sus palabras no fueran a tener alguna oculta y penosa influencia sobre ellas. Y se le ocurrió que Dorothea podía ser el verdadero motivo de la visita de Will a Middlemarch.

Los dos hombres se compadecieron mutuamente, pero solo Will adivinó el alcance de los problemas de su amigo. Cuando Lydgate habló con desesperanzada resignación de instalarse en Londres y añadió, con una débil sonrisa: «Volverá usted a hacernos compañía, amigo mío», Will se sintió indeciblemente apenado y no dijo nada. Por la mañana Rosamond le había suplicado que exhortara a Lydgate a dar aquel paso; y le pareció como si estuviera presenciando en un escenario mágico un futuro en el que él iba cediendo sin alegría a las pequeñas tentaciones de las circunstancias, que es una historia de perdición más común que cualquier pacto aislado de gran trascendencia.

Nos hallamos en un punto peligroso cuando empezamos a contemplar pasivamente nuestro futuro o a vernos arrastrados con desanimada aceptación hacia faltas insípidas y éxitos despreciables. El pobre Lydgate, situado ya en esa frontera, gemía interiormente, y Will estaba llegando a ella. Aquella noche le parecía como si la crueldad de su explosión de cólera con Rosamond le hubiese creado una obligación, y esa obligación le daba miedo; le daba miedo la buena voluntad de Lydgate, ajeno a cualquier sospecha; le daba miedo su propia insatisfacción con su vida destrozada, que podía llevarlo a una frivolidad carente de todo propósito.

Capítulo LXXX

Aunque legislador severo, posees
el don más benigno de la divinidad;
nada conocemos tan hermoso
como la sonrisa que adorna tu rostro;
las flores ríen ante ti en sus macizos,
y su fragancia va siguiendo tus huellas;
preservas del error a las estrellas;
y los cielos más antiguos, gracias a ti, conservan su fortaleza.

WORDSWORTH, *Oda al deber*

Dorothea, cuando vio al señor Farebrother por la mañana, le prometió ir a cenar a la rectoría a su vuelta de Freshitt. Existía un frecuente intercambio de visitas entre la dueña de Lowick Manor y la familia Farebrother, lo que a ella le permitía decir que no estaba completamente sola en su casa, evitando así por el momento la imposición de una dama de compañía. Al llegar a Lowick y recordar la invitación, Dorothea se alegró de ello; y al descubrir que aún disponía de una hora antes de tener que vestirse para cenar, se dirigió directamente a la escuela y entabló conversación con el maestro y la maestra acerca de la nueva campana, prestando mucha atención a los pequeños detalles que le daban y a las frases que repetían y consiguiendo una sensación muy intensa de ser una persona atareada. De vuelta a casa, hizo una pausa para hablar con el viejo Bunney, ocupado con algunas simientes en el jardín, y departió juiciosamente con aquel sabio rural acerca de los cultivos que más rendirían en una extensión muy pequeña de terreno y acerca del resultado de sesenta años de experiencia con la tierra… es decir, que si la tierra era bastante margosa daba buen resultado, pero que si llegaba la humedad, mucha humedad, y lo convertía todo en una masa pastosa, entonces…

Al advertir que sus preocupaciones sociales habían logrado retrasarla, se vistió a toda prisa y llegó a la rectoría bastante antes de lo necesario. Aquella casa, sin embargo, nunca resultaba aburrida; el señor Farebrother, como un segundo White de Selborne[141], tenía continuamente algo nuevo que contar sobre sus huéspedes y *protégés* desprovistos del don de la palabra, y estaba enseñando a los muchachos de los alrededores a no atormentarlos; acababa de establecer a dos hermosas cabras como mascotas del pueblo, para que se pasearan por todo él como animales sagrados. La velada transcurrió alegremente hasta después del té y Dorothea había hablado más de lo corriente y se había explayado con el señor Farebrother sobre posibles historias de criaturas que se comunicaran precisa y brevemente con las antenas y que, hasta donde se nos alcanza, podrían mantener discusiones parlamentarias, cuando, de repente, se oyeron unos suaves sonidos inarticulados que atrajeron la atención de todo el mundo.

—Henrietta Noble —dijo la señora Farebrother, viendo que su diminuta hermana se movía entre las patas de los muebles con aire acongojado—, ¿qué te pasa?

—He perdido mi caja de carey para las pastillas. Me temo que el gatito se la haya llevado jugando —dijo la anciana, que, sin darse cuenta, siguió emitiendo aquellos sonidos como de roedor.

—¿Es un gran tesoro, tía? —dijo el señor Farebrother, alzándose las gafas y mirando hacia la alfombra.

—Me la regaló el señor Ladislaw —dijo la señorita Noble—. Es una cajita alemana muy bonita, pero cuando se cae siempre da vueltas hasta llegar lo más lejos que puede.

—¡Ah! El regalo de Ladislaw —dijo el señor Farebrother, con el acento de quien se halla ante un

argumento inapelable, levantándose y poniéndose a buscar. La caja apareció por fin bajo una cómoda con espejo y la señorita Noble la recuperó con gran alegría, diciendo:

—La última vez se metió bajo la pantalla de la chimenea.

—Son cosas del corazón —dijo el señor Farebrother, sonriendo a Dorothea mientras se sentaba de nuevo.

—Si Henrietta Noble le toma afecto a alguien, señora Casaubon —dijo la madre del vicario con gran énfasis—, es como un perrito… Utilizaría como almohada los zapatos de esa persona y dormiría mejor.

—Con los zapatos del señor Ladislaw claro que sí —dijo Henrietta Noble.

Dorothea hizo un esfuerzo por sonreír a modo de respuesta. Le sorprendió y le molestó descubrir que su corazón latía con violencia y que después era completamente inútil tratar de recuperar su animación. Alarmada ante sí misma… temerosa de dar nuevos síntomas de un cambio tan ligado a un tema concreto de conversación, Dorothea se puso en pie y dijo en voz baja y sin ocultar su ansiedad:

—Tengo que irme; estoy más cansada de lo que creía.

El señor Farebrother, que en seguida se daba cuenta de todo, también se levantó y dijo:

—Es cierto; debe de haberse fatigado mucho hablando de Lydgate. Acusamos esfuerzos como ese cuando ha desaparecido la emoción.

El vicario le ofreció el brazo para acompañarla hasta su casa, pero la señora Casaubon no hizo el menor intento de hablar, ni siquiera cuando él le dio las buenas noches.

Dorothea había llegado al límite de su resistencia, cayendo indefensa en poder de una angustia ineludible. Después de despedir a Tantripp con unas pocas palabras en voz muy baja, cerró la puerta de su cuarto y volviéndose hacia la habitación vacía se llevó las manos a la cabeza y gimió:

—¡Cómo lo quería!

Luego llegó la hora en que las oleadas de sufrimiento la sacudieron con demasiada intensidad para encontrarse en condiciones de razonar. Solo fue capaz de lamentarse con violentos susurros, entre gemidos, de la perdida confianza que había cultivado y mantenido viva desde los días de Roma, cuando era aún una simiente muy pequeña; de su alegría perdida al aferrarse con silencioso amor y fe a la persona que, despreciada por otros, tenía valor a sus ojos; de su perdido orgullo de mujer, al creerse reina en la memoria del ser amado; de la perdida esperanza, dulce aunque imprecisa, de que se cruzaran a lo largo de alguna senda, sin que los años transcurridos les impidieran iniciar una nueva vida en común como si no hubiese pasado el tiempo.

Durante aquella hora Dorothea repitió los actos que los ojos misericordiosos de la soledad han contemplado a lo largo de los tiempos en las luchas espirituales del ser humano; suplicó que la dureza y la frialdad y el dolorido cansancio le proporcionaran alivio contra la misteriosa fuerza incorpórea de su angustia; se tumbó en el suelo y dejó que la noche se fuera enfriando a su alrededor, mientras su cuerpo de mujer se veía agitado por los sollozos como si fuese una niña desesperanzada.

Eran dos las imágenes… dos formas vivas que le partían el corazón, como si fuera el de la madre a quien le parece ver a su hijo dividido por la espada y aprieta contra su pecho una mitad ensangrentada, mientras vuelve los ojos en un paroxismo de dolor hacia la mitad que se lleva la mentirosa que no ha sabido nunca del dolor de una madre.

Aquí, con la cercanía de una sonrisa que responde a lo que decimos; allí, dentro del vínculo vibrante de las palabras compartidas, se hallaba la criatura radiante en quien había confiado… que vino a ella como el espíritu de la mañana a visitar la lóbrega cripta donde languidecía como esposa de una vida agotada; y ahora, con un conocimiento pleno que hasta entonces nunca se había dado, Dorothea extendía los brazos hacia él y se lamentaba con amargas lágrimas de que aquella proximidad fuera una ilusión sin consistencia: descubría su pasión mediante el reconocimiento sincero de su desesperanza.

Y allí, aparte, pero sin abandonarla, acompañándola dondequiera que iba, estaba el Will Ladislaw que era una fe traicionada, desprovista de esperanza, una falsa ilusión descubierta. No: un ser vivo a quien no podía aún dirigirse ningún lamento de súplica desde dentro del desprecio y de la indignación y del orgullo ofendido. El fuego de la cólera de Dorothea no se apagaba fácilmente y ardía con repetidas llamaradas de desdén y de censura. ¿Por qué había irrumpido en la vida de Dorothea, que podía haber alcanzado suficiente plenitud sin él? ¿Por qué le había ofrecido su consideración vulgar y sus palabras de labios afuera, a ella que no tenía nada mezquino que darle a cambio? Ladislaw sabía que la estaba engañando… quiso, en el momento mismo de la despedida, hacerle creer que le había entregado su corazón por completo, cuando ya había gastado la mitad. ¿Por qué no siguió entre la multitud de aquellos a los que Dorothea nada pedía… aquellos por los que se limitaba a rezar para que fuesen menos despreciables?

Acabó perdiendo energía incluso para seguir gimiendo y lamentándose con violentos susurros: sus

sollozos se fueron haciendo más débiles y entre las lágrimas acabó durmiéndose sobre el frío suelo.

Al alba, cuando la luz era aún muy débil, Dorothea se despertó: no con asombrada incertidumbre sobre dónde estaba o qué había sucedido, sino sabiendo con toda claridad que se miraba en los ojos del dolor. Se levantó, se envolvió con ropa de abrigo y se instaló en un sillón donde había velado con frecuencia. Tenía vigor suficiente para soportar aquella dura noche sin más consecuencias que algunos dolores y sensación de cansancio; pero se había despertado en una situación distinta: sentía el alma libre de su terrible conflicto; ya no luchaba a brazo partido con el dolor, sino que podía departir con él como con un viejo amigo y hacerle partícipe de sus pensamientos. Porque ahora las ideas acudían en gran número. En la manera de ser de Dorothea no cabía la posibilidad de que su espíritu permaneciera encerrado por más tiempo que el de la duración de un paroxismo en la estrecha celda de la desgracia, en la aflicción embrutecedora de una conciencia que solo ve el destino de otro como un accidente del propio.

Vivió de nuevo de manera pausada la mañana del día anterior, obligándose a repasar cada detalle y su posible significado. ¿Estaba sola en aquella escena? ¿Era únicamente suyo aquel acontecimiento? Se obligó a verlo ligado a la vida de otra mujer… otra mujer a la que ella se acercaba con la esperanza de llevar claridad y consuelo a su juventud ensombrecida. En su primer estallido de celosa indignación y repugnancia, al salir de aquella habitación odiosa, arrojó lejos toda la clemencia con que había emprendido la visita. Había envuelto tanto a Will como a Rosamond en su encendido desprecio y le pareció como si la señora Lydgate se hubiera consumido, desapareciendo de su vista para siempre. Pero el bajo impulso que hace a una mujer más cruel con una rival que con un amante infiel carecía de fuerza para repetirse en Dorothea una vez que el espíritu de justicia dominante en ella superó el tumulto, mostrándole otra medida más verdadera de las cosas. Todas las reflexiones e imágenes con que anteriormente había tratado de representarse las tribulaciones de Lydgate y aquella unión matrimonial que, como la suya, parecía tener dificultades, tanto patentes como escondidas… todo aquel intento sincero de comprensión volvió a ella con nueva fuerza: se afirmó como se impone un conocimiento adquirido, impidiendo que veamos como veíamos en los días de nuestra ignorancia. Dorothea le dijo a su pesar irremediable que tenía que hacerla más útil en lugar de apartarla del esfuerzo.

Y ¿quién podía predecir los resultados de aquella crisis en tres vidas cuya relación con la suya le imponía las mismas obligaciones que si se tratara de suplicantes con la rama sagrada? Ella no era quién para elegir caprichosamente a los destinatarios de su ayuda. Dorothea anhelaba que la justicia perfecta pudiera hacer un trono en su interior para gobernar desde allí su voluntad descarriada. «¿Qué debería hacer… cómo debería actuar ahora, hoy mismo, si pudiese dominar mi dolor, obligándolo al silencio, y pensara en esos tres?».

Le había costado mucho tiempo llegar a hacerse aquella pregunta y para entonces ya entraba luz en la habitación. Descorrió las cortinas y contempló el trozo de carretera que se hallaba a la vista, con los campos de más allá, al otro lado de la verja. En la carretera había un hombre con un hato a la espalda y una mujer con su bebé; en los campos, figuras que se movían… quizá un pastor con su perro. Muy lejos, en el ciclo que se curvaba, había aparecido una luz nacarada; y Dorothea sintió la amplitud del mundo y el despertar multiforme de los hombres al trabajo y a la paciencia. También ella era parte de aquella vida elemental, palpitante, y no podía contemplarla desde su lujoso refugio como simple espectadora, ni cerrar los ojos para quejarse de manera egoísta.

Lo que acabaría haciendo a lo largo de aquel día aún no estaba suficientemente claro, pero alguna meta a su alcance empezó a impulsarla como un murmullo que se acerca y que pronto nos llegará con toda claridad. Se quitó la ropa que llevaba puesta, y que parecía contener algo del cansancio de una dura noche en vela, y empezó a arreglarse. En seguida llamó a Tantripp, que se presentó envuelta en su bata.

—Cómo es posible, señora, ¡no se ha acostado en toda la bendita noche! —exclamó Tantripp, mirando primero la cama y luego el rostro de Dorothea, quien, pese a haberse lavado, tenía las mejillas pálidas y los párpados enrojecidos de una *mater dolorosa*—. Se va usted a matar, seguro que sí. Y nadie le negaría ya el derecho a disfrutar de unas cuantas comodidades.

—No te alarmes, Tantripp —dijo Dorothea, sonriendo—. He dormido; no estoy enferma. Me gustaría tomar una taza de café lo antes posible. Quiero que me traigas el vestido nuevo; y también es muy posible que quiera el sombrero nuevo.

—Llevan más de un mes preparados, señora, y daré gracias al cielo si la veo por fin con unos cuantos crespones menos —dijo Tantripp, agachándose para encender el fuego—. El luto tiene sus razones, lo digo siempre; y tres pliegues en los bajos de la falda y un bordado muy simple en el sombrero… y si alguien parece un ángel, mi niña, es usted con un bordado de malla… que es lo que se debe hacer en el segundo año. Por lo menos, eso es lo que yo pienso —terminó Tantripp, mirando con preocupación el fuego—; y si

alguien se casara conmigo imaginando que iba a llevar dos años por él esos odiosos velos, lo estaría engañando su misma vanidad, no tengo más que decir.

—No te preocupes por el fuego, Tan —dijo Dorothea, hablando como en los días de Lausana, aunque en voz muy baja—; tráeme el café.

Se acurrucó en el gran sillón, apoyando la cabeza en fatigada inmovilidad, mientras Tantripp se marchaba maravillándose de aquella extraña paradoja en el comportamiento de su joven señora: que precisamente la mañana que tenía más cara de viuda que nunca, hubiera pedido el alivio de luto rechazado en ocasiones anteriores. Tantripp nunca habría descubierto la explicación de aquel misterio. Dorothea deseaba afirmar que su vida no iba a ser menos activa que antes por haber tenido que enterrar una alegría íntima; y la costumbre, presente en su imaginación, de que todo comienzo exige ropa nueva, hacía que quisiera recurrir a todos los apoyos exteriores, hasta al más insignificante, en su camino hacia la calma y la firmeza. Porque la decisión que había tomado no tenía nada de fácil.

A las once, sin embargo, se puso en camino, dispuesta a hacer, lo más tranquila y discretamente posible, un segundo intento de ver y salvar a Rosamond.

Capítulo LXXXI

Du Erde warst auch diese Nacht beständig,
Und athmest neu erquickt zu meinen Füssen,
Beginnest schon mit Lust mich zu umgeben,
Du regst und rührst ein kräftiges Beschliessen
Zum höchsten Dasein immerfort zu streben.[142]

Fausto, 2.ª parte

Cuando Dorothea se encontró de nuevo en el zaguán de la casa de Lydgate, hablando con Martha, el médico se hallaba en una habitación muy próxima, con la puerta entreabierta, preparándose para salir. Al oír la voz de Dorothea acudió inmediatamente.

—¿Cree usted que la señora Lydgate podrá recibirme esta mañana? —dijo ella, después de llegar a la conclusión de que sería mejor no mencionar su visita anterior.

—Estoy seguro de que sí —respondió Lydgate, ocultando la impresión que le causaba el aspecto de Dorothea, tan cambiado como el de Rosamond—, si tiene la amabilidad de entrar y me permite decirle que está usted aquí. No se ha encontrado muy bien desde su visita de ayer, pero hoy ya está mejor y considero muy probable que se anime al verla de nuevo.

Era evidente que Lydgate, como Dorothea había supuesto, no sabía nada de lo sucedido el día anterior; más bien parecía imaginar que había logrado su propósito. Dorothea llevaba preparada una notita pidiendo a Rosamond que la recibiera, notita que habría entregado a la criada de no haberse encontrado con Lydgate, pero ahora le preocupó mucho la reacción que pudiera suscitar el anuncio de su visita.

Después de conducirla hasta el salón, el médico hizo una pausa para sacar una carta del bolsillo y ponérsela en las manos, diciendo:

—La escribí anoche, e iba a llevarla a Lowick de camino hacia mi trabajo. Cuando se quiere manifestar algo que está muy por encima del simple agradecimiento, vale más escribir que hablar… al menos no se oye lo poco convincentes que resultan las palabras.

El rostro de Dorothea se iluminó.

—Soy yo quien ha de estar más agradecida, puesto que me deja ayudarle. Ha aceptado usted, ¿no es cierto? —dijo, asaltada repentinamente por la duda.

—Sí. Bulstrode recibirá hoy el cheque.

Lydgate no añadió nada más, pero subió en busca de Rosamond, que había terminado de vestirse hacía muy poco y permanecía inmóvil, preguntándose lánguidamente qué haría a continuación, ya que su habitual tendencia a no estar nunca desocupada, incluso en los días de mayor tristeza, la empujaba a iniciar trabajos que apenas progresaban o que abandonaba por falta de interés. Parecía enferma, aunque había recobrado su habitual sosiego en los modales, y Lydgate temía inquietarla si le hacía preguntas. Por la mañana le habló de la carta de Dorothea con el cheque, añadiendo a continuación: «Ladislaw ha llegado, Rosy; anoche estuvo aquí conmigo; supongo que volverá hoy. Me pareció bastante cansado y deprimido». Rosamond no le respondió.

Ahora, al llegar a su cuarto, le dijo muy amablemente:

—Rosy, querida, la señora Casaubon viene a verte otra vez; querrás recibirla, ¿no es cierto?

Que su mujer se ruborizara y pareciera sobresaltarse un tanto, no le sorprendió después de la agitación producida por la entrevista del día anterior… una agitación beneficiosa, pensó Lydgate, puesto que parecía

haber logrado que Rosamond se interesara de nuevo por él.

La señora Lydgate no se atrevió a decir que no. No estaba segura de la firmeza de su voz si aludía a lo sucedido el día anterior. ¿Por qué volvía la señora Casaubon? La respuesta era un vacío que Rosamond solo podía llenar con miedo, porque las terribles palabras de Will Ladislaw habían logrado que pensar en Dorothea le causara un dolor punzante. Sin embargo, en su nueva situación de humillante inseguridad no se atrevió a hacer otra cosa que obedecer. No respondió afirmativamente, pero permitió que Lydgate le pusiera un chal ligero sobre los hombros mientras decía:

—Salgo ahora mismo de casa.

Entonces algo cruzó por la imaginación de Rosamond que la impulsó a decir:

—Por favor, dile a Martha que no haga pasar a nadie al salón.

Y Lydgate asintió, convencido de que entendía perfectamente aquel deseo. Fue con su mujer hasta la puerta del salón y luego se dio la vuelta, pensando que debía de ser un desastre como marido para tener que ganarse la confianza de Rosamond recurriendo a la influencia de otra mujer.

La señora Lydgate, al ceñirse el suave chal mientras avanzaba hacia Dorothea, estaba también envolviendo su alma en fría reserva. ¿Había venido la señora Casaubon para decirle algo de Will? Si tal era el caso, se tomaba una libertad que la ofendía; y se preparó para recibir sus palabras con cortés impasibilidad. Will había herido su orgullo demasiado dolorosamente para que sintiera el menor remordimiento: su propio agravio le parecía mucho más importante. La señora Casaubon no solo era la «preferida», sino que contaba además con la formidable ventaja de ser la benefactora de Lydgate; y desde la confusa y afligida perspectiva de la pobre Rosamond, aquella mujer que la superaba en todo se presentaría ahora convencida de hallarse en una situación ventajosa y con la suficiente animosidad para hacer uso de ella. De hecho, no solo Rosamond, sino también, quizá, cualquier otra persona que conociera los antecedentes del caso y no la espontaneidad con que actuaba Dorothea, se hubiera preguntado cuál podía ser el motivo de su visita.

Dando la impresión de ser el encantador fantasma de sí misma, con su elegante esbeltez cubierta por el suave chal blanco, y la boca y las mejillas redondas e infantiles que sugerían de manera inevitable mansedumbre e inocencia, Rosamond se detuvo como a unos tres metros de su visitante y le hizo una inclinación de cabeza. Pero Dorothea, que se había quitado los guantes, por un impulso que nunca podía resistir cuando quería tener sensación de libertad, se adelantó y con una expresión en el rostro de triste pero dulce franqueza, tendió la mano. Rosamond no pudo evitar mirarla a los ojos, ni unir su mano con la de Dorothea, que la estrechó con una tierna actitud maternal; e inmediatamente empezó a dudar de sus prejuicios. Los ojos de Rosamond eran muy rápidos para las caras; vio que el rostro de la señora Casaubon parecía pálido y desencajado comparado con el día anterior, pero amable y de algún modo semejante a la firme suavidad de la mano. Dorothea, sin embargo, había confiado demasiado en su propia fortaleza: la claridad y la intensidad de sus procesos mentales matutinos eran una prolongación de una exaltación nerviosa que hacía de su organismo algo tan peligrosamente sensible como un trozo del más delicado cristal de Venecia; y al mirar a Rosamond sintió de pronto que se le dilataba el corazón y era incapaz de hablar… que necesitaba de toda su energía para contener las lágrimas. Esto último lo consiguió, y la emoción solo atravesó su rostro como el espíritu de un gemido; pero contribuyó a que Rosamond pensase que el estado de ánimo de la señora Casaubon debía de ser muy distinto al que ella había imaginado.

De manera que, sin una palabra de introducción, se sentaron en las sillas que tenían más cerca y que resultaron ser también las que estaban más juntas, aunque la idea de Rosamond cuando hizo la inclinación de cabeza había sido mantenerse lo más lejos posible de su visitante. Ahora, sin embargo, dejó de pensar en cómo resultaría todo para preguntarse simplemente qué iba a suceder a continuación. Dorothea empezó a hablar con gran simplicidad, adquiriendo firmeza en la voz a medida que avanzaba.

—Ayer venía a hacer algo que no terminé de hacer; esa es la razón de que haya vuelto tan pronto. Espero que no me considere demasiado importuna cuando le diga que venía a hablarle de la injusticia que se ha cometido con el señor Lydgate. A usted le alegrará, estoy segura, saber muchas cosas de él que a su marido no le gustaría contar porque son un descargo suyo y están ligadas a su honor. Le alegrará saber que tiene amigos que le aprecian y que no han dejado de creer que su conducta ha sido siempre intachable. ¿Me permitirá que hable de ello sin pensar que me tomo demasiadas libertades?

El tono cordial, suplicante, que parecía elevarse con generosa valentía sobre los hechos que habían proporcionado a Rosamond motivos para distanciarse de aquella mujer y para odiarla, descendió tan consoladoramente como un cálido bálsamo sobre su desconfianza y su miedo. La señora Casaubon conocía aquellos hechos, por supuesto, pero no iba a mencionarlos. El alivio fue demasiado grande para que Rosamond sintiera nada más en aquel momento.

—Sé que ha sido usted muy buena —respondió amablemente, impulsada por la tranquilidad recién adquirida—. Escucharé con mucho gusto lo que quiera decirme sobre Tertius.

—Anteayer —dijo Dorothea—, cuando le pedí a su marido que acudiera a Lowick para darme su opinión sobre los asuntos del hospital, me explicó su conducta y sus sentimientos durante los tristes sucesos que han hecho que personas ignorantes sospechen de él. Me lo contó porque yo fui muy audaz y se lo pregunté directamente. Estaba convencida de que no había obrado en ningún momento de forma deshonrosa y le pedí que me explicara lo sucedido. Confesó que lo que me decía no se lo había contado a nadie antes, ni siquiera a usted, porque le desagradaba mucho afirmar: «No he hecho nada malo», como si eso fuera una prueba, cuando hay personas culpables que también lo dicen. La verdad es que su marido no sabía nada de ese hombre, Raffles, ni de que existiera secreto alguno relacionado con él; y pensó que el señor Bulstrode le ofrecía el dinero por razones altruistas, arrepentido de habérselo negado anteriormente. Su única preocupación con el enfermo era ponerle un tratamiento indicado y le preocupó un poco que el caso no terminara como él había esperado; pero pensó entonces, y todavía lo sigue pensando, que la muerte del enfermo pudo no ser culpa de nadie. Yo les he contado todo esto al señor Farebrother, al señor Brooke y a sir James Chettam: los tres creen en la inocencia de su marido. Eso la alegrará, ¿no es cierto? Tiene que infundirle valor.

El rostro de Dorothea se había animado progresivamente, iluminando a Rosamond desde muy cerca, y esta última sintió algo así como una vergonzosa timidez ante aquel entusiasmo tan desinteresado.

—Muchas gracias; es usted muy amable —dijo, con ruborizada confusión.

—Y el señor Lydgate se dio cuenta de que había obrado muy mal no contándole a usted todo esto. Pero estoy segura de que usted lo perdonará. La verdad es que su felicidad le preocupa mucho más que ninguna otra cosa… siente que su vida está unida de manera indisoluble a la suya, y lo que más le duele es que sus desgracias sean un motivo de sufrimiento para usted. Conmigo podía hablar porque yo era una persona ajena. Luego le pregunté si le parecía bien que viniera a verla; porque me han afectado mucho las dificultades de los dos. Esa es la razón de que me presentara ayer y de que haya vuelto hoy. El infortunio es muy difícil de soportar, ¿no es cierto? ¿Cómo es posible que vivamos y pensemos que otras personas sufren… sufren intensamente… y que, pudiendo ayudarlas, no lo intentemos nunca?

Dorothea, completamente dominada por las emociones que expresaba, se olvidó de todo excepto de que estaba hablando desde lo más hondo de sus propias tribulaciones a las de Rosamond. La emoción se había ido mezclando cada vez más íntimamente con sus palabras, hasta que el tono de su voz podría haber herido la sensibilidad de cualquier persona, como el grito sordo de una criatura que sufre en la oscuridad. Y sin darse cuenta, había puesto otra vez su mano sobre la más pequeña de su interlocutora que ya había estrechado anteriormente.

Rosamond, dominada por una angustia irresistible, como si alguien le hubiera hurgado en una herida abierta, prorrumpió en sollozos histéricos, como había hecho el día anterior al abrazarse a su marido. La pobre Dorothea sintió que su propio dolor volvía sobre ella como una gran ola al pensar en la participación que Will Ladislaw pudiera tener en la agitación de Rosamond. Temió no ser capaz de contenerse lo bastante para concluir aquella entrevista y, si bien su mano descansaba aún sobre el regazo de Rosamond, aunque la de esta se hubiese retirado, estaba ya luchando contra sus propios sollozos, cada vez más difíciles de reprimir. Dorothea trató de dominarse pensando que aquel podía ser un momento crucial para tres vidas: no para la suya, no; allí había sucedido ya lo irrevocable; pero sí para las tres vidas relacionadas con la suya por la solemne proximidad en el peligro y en la aflicción. La frágil criatura que lloraba tan cerca de ella… quizá hubiese tiempo para rescatarla de la calamidad de unos falsos lazos incompatibles con sus obligaciones; y aquel momento era distinto de todos los demás: Rosamond y ella nunca volverían a encontrarse compartiendo la misma emocionada vivencia de lo sucedido el día anterior. Dorothea comprendió que la relación entre las dos era lo bastante singular para procurarle una peculiar influencia, aunque ignoraba por completo que la participación de sus propios sentimientos en aquel conflicto fuese plenamente conocida por la señora Lydgate.

Para Rosamond se trataba de una crisis más nueva de lo que Dorothea pudiera imaginar, porque se hallaba aún bajo los efectos del primer gran golpe que había reducido a añicos su mundo de ensueño, mundo en el que siempre había sentido una gran confianza en sí misma y adoptado una actitud crítica hacia los demás; y aquella extraña e inesperada manifestación de sentimientos por parte de una mujer a la que se había acercado con temor y aversión, convencida de que la odiaba y estaba celosa de ella, hizo que su alma se tambaleara aún más con la sensación de que se movía por un universo desconocido en el que había sido introducida a la fuerza.

Cuando la estremecida garganta de Rosamond fue recuperando la calma y pudo apartar el pañuelo con

el que había estado ocultando el rostro, sus ojos se encontraron con los de Dorothea con tanta indefensión como si fueran dos flores azules. ¿De qué servía preocuparse por los buenos modales después de llorar de aquella forma? Y Dorothea tenía un aire casi igualmente infantil, con la huella no borrada de una lágrima silenciosa. Entre aquellas dos mujeres el orgullo había dejado de tener importancia.

—Estábamos hablando de su marido —dijo Dorothea con cierta timidez—. Cuando vino a casa el otro día me pareció muy desmejorado por el sufrimiento. Hacía semanas que no lo veía. Me dijo que se había sentido muy solo en sus tribulaciones; pero creo que lo habría soportado todo mucho mejor si hubiese sido capaz de sincerarse por completo con usted.

—Tertius se enfada y se impacienta mucho si digo algo —explicó Rosamond, imaginando que su marido se había quejado de ella a Dorothea—. No debería sorprenderse de que me oponga a tratar con él de temas penosos.

—Se culpaba por no haber hablado —dijo Dorothea—. Me confesó que no podría ser feliz con nada que a usted la hiciese desgraciada… que su matrimonio era un lazo que afectaba inevitablemente a sus decisiones en cualquier terreno; y por esa razón rechazó mi oferta de que conservara su puesto en el hospital, porque eso le obligaría a quedarse en Middlemarch, y no deseaba hacer nada que a usted le resultara penoso. Todo esto pudo decírmelo porque sabe de mis muchas tribulaciones en el matrimonio, por culpa de la enfermedad de mi marido, que fue un gran obstáculo para los planes del señor Casaubon y le causó mucha tristeza; y no ignora que tengo experiencia de lo difícil que es caminar con el temor constante a herir a otra persona ligada a nosotros. —Dorothea esperó un poco; había observado la aparición de un débil gesto de satisfacción en el rostro de Rosamond. No recibió respuesta y continuó, con creciente emoción—: El matrimonio es muy distinto a todo lo demás. Hay algo terrible, incluso, en la proximidad que crea. Aunque amásemos a otra persona más que… más que a aquella con la que estamos casados, no serviría de nada… —La pobre Dorothea, en su temblorosa ansiedad, solo era capaz de encontrar las palabras a trompicones—. Quiero decir que el matrimonio exige toda nuestra capacidad de dar o recibir algo de dicha. Sé que ese otro afecto puede ser una cosa muy honda… pero asesina nuestro matrimonio… que luego sigue con nosotras como un cadáver… mientras todo lo demás ha desaparecido. Y nuestro marido… si nos ha querido y ha tenido confianza en nosotras, y nosotras no le hemos ayudado, sino que hemos convertido su vida en una maldición…

Su voz se había hecho casi inaudible: temía dar por sentadas demasiadas cosas, y hablar como si ella misma fuese la perfección dirigiéndose al error. Estaba demasiado preocupada con su propia ansiedad para advertir que también Rosamond temblaba; y, al sentir la necesidad de expresar una compasión de igual a igual, y no una actitud de rechazo, puso sus manos sobre las de Rosamond y dijo más deprisa y con mayor agitación:

—Ya sé, ya sé que esos sentimientos pueden tener mucha fuerza… que se han apoderado de nosotras sin que nos diéramos cuenta… es tan duro que renunciar a ello puede parecernos como morir… y somos débiles… yo soy débil…

Las oleadas de su propio dolor, del que se esforzaba por salvar a Rosamond, se abalanzaron sobre ella con fuerza irresistible. Se detuvo, dominada por la emoción; sin llorar, pero sintiéndose interiormente apresada. Su rostro había adquirido una palidez mortal, le temblaban los labios y sus manos apretaban desvalidamente las manos que tenían debajo.

Rosamond, arrastrada por unas emociones más fuertes que las suyas… empujada por un nuevo impulso que daba a todo un aspecto nuevo, terrible, indefinido… no pudo hallar palabras, pero de manera instintiva tocó con los labios la frente de Dorothea que estaba muy cerca y luego, por espacio de un minuto, las dos mujeres se abrazaron como podrían hacerlo las víctimas de un naufragio.

—No es verdad lo que usted cree —dijo Rosamond, la voz convertida en anhelante susurro, mientras aún sentía los brazos de Dorothea rodeándola… obligada por una necesidad misteriosa a librarse de algo que la oprimía como un delito de sangre.

Se apartaron para mirarse.

—Cuando entró ayer… no estaba sucediendo lo que usted pensó —dijo Rosamond en el mismo tono. Hubo un movimiento de sorprendida atención en Dorothea. Supuso que Rosamond iba a tratar de justificarse—. Ladislaw me estaba diciendo lo mucho que amaba a otra mujer, para que comprendiera que nunca podría quererme —dijo, hablando cada vez con más precipitación—. Y ahora creo que me odia porque… porque usted lo juzgó equivocadamente. Dice que yo tengo la culpa de que usted piense mal de él… de que crea que es una persona falsa. Pero no quiero que sea por culpa mía. Nunca ha sentido el menor cariño por mí… sé que es así… siempre le he parecido una persona insignificante. Ayer dijo que para él no existía más mujer que usted. La culpa de lo que sucedió es enteramente mía. Ladislaw aseguró que nunca se

lo podría explicar a usted… por culpa mía. Que nunca volvería usted a tener buena opinión de él. Pero ahora ya se lo he contado y él no tendrá que reprocharme nada.

Rosamond había abierto su alma empujada por impulsos que no había conocido nunca. Empezó su confesión bajo la influencia dulcificadora de la emoción de Dorothea; y a medida que avanzaba fue teniendo la sensación de que rechazaba los reproches de Will, que eran todavía una herida abierta en su interior.

El cambio en los sentimientos de Dorothea fue demasiado violento para llamarlo alegría. Era un tumulto en el que la terrible tensión de la noche y de la mañana creaba un dolor que se resistía a desaparecer: solo se daba cuenta de que sería motivo de alegría una vez recuperada la calma. Su reacción inmediata fue una comprensión sin límites; ahora se preocupaba por Rosamond sin esfuerzo alguno y respondió con gran vehemencia a sus últimas palabras:

—No; ya no puede reprocharle nada.

Con su habitual tendencia a sobrevalorar la bondad en otros, Dorothea sintió un gran desbordamiento del corazón hacia Rosamond por el generoso esfuerzo con que la había liberado de sus sufrimientos, sin darse cuenta de que aquel esfuerzo era un reflejo de su propia energía.

Después de que las dos guardaran silencio durante unos instantes, añadió:

—No lamenta que haya venido esta mañana, ¿verdad?

—No, ha sido usted muy buena conmigo —dijo Rosamond—. No creía que fuera a serlo tanto. Me sentía muy desgraciada. Y ahora tampoco soy feliz. Todo es muy triste.

—Pero vendrán días mejores. Su marido recibirá el aprecio que se merece. Y necesita su apoyo. Es a usted a quien ama por encima de todo. Lo peor habría sido perder eso… y esté segura de que no lo ha perdido —dijo Dorothea.

Trató de ignorar la irresistible idea de su propia liberación, temiendo no lograr algún signo de que la señora Lydgate miraba con renovado afecto a su marido.

—¿Tertius no me criticó, entonces? —dijo Rosamond, comprendiendo ahora que Lydgate pudiera haber hecho cualquier confidencia a la señora Casaubon, que era sin duda diferente de otras mujeres. Quizá había un vago regusto de celos en la pregunta. Una sonrisa empezó a dibujarse en el rostro de Dorothea mientras decía:

—¡Claro que no! ¿Cómo puede usted imaginarlo? —Pero en aquel momento se abrió la puerta y entró Lydgate.

—He vuelto en mi calidad de médico —dijo—. Después de irme han empezado a obsesionarme dos rostros extremadamente pálidos: la señora Casaubon parecía tan necesitada de cuidados como tú, Rosy. Y he pensado que no había cumplido con mi deber dejándoos solas; de manera que después de ver a Coleman he vuelto a casa. Me he dado cuenta de que ha venido usted a pie y de que se está cubriendo el cielo… quizá tengamos lluvia. ¿Le parece que envíe a alguien para pedir su coche?

—¡No, no! Soy muy fuerte: me hace falta dar un paseo —dijo Dorothea, levantándose con el rostro lleno de animación—. La señora Lydgate y yo hemos charlado mucho y ya es hora de que me vaya. Siempre se me acusa de falta de moderación y de hablar demasiado.

Le ofreció la mano a Rosamond y se dijeron adiós tranquilamente, sin besos ni otras muestras de efusión: las dos habían experimentado emociones demasiado profundas para servirse de sus signos de manera superficial.

Mientras Lydgate la acompañaba hasta la puerta, Dorothea no dijo nada de Rosamond, pero le habló del señor Farebrother y de los otros amigos convencidos ya de su inocencia.

Cuando el médico regresó junto a su mujer, ella ya se había sentado en el sofá, con una fatiga llena de resignación.

—Bueno, Rosy —dijo Lydgate de pie junto a ella, acariciándole el cabello—, ¿qué piensas de la señora Casaubon ahora que la has tratado más?

—Creo que debe de ser mejor que nadie —dijo Rosamond—, y muy hermosa además. ¡Si la ves tantas veces te sentirás cada vez más descontento de mí!

Lydgate rio ante aquel «tantas veces».

—Pero ¿ha logrado que tú te sientas menos descontenta conmigo?

—Creo que sí —dijo Rosamond, mirándolo a la cara—. Qué hundidos tienes los ojos, Tertius… y haz el favor de echarte el pelo para atrás.

Lydgate alzó una alargada mano blanca para obedecerla, agradecido por aquella pequeña muestra de interés. La fantasía de la pobre Rosamond había vuelto de sus vagabundeos terriblemente castigada… con humildad suficiente para cobijarse bajo el antiguo y despreciado refugio. Y el refugio seguía allí: Lydgate

había aceptado las limitaciones de su futuro con tristeza resignada. Había elegido a aquella criatura frágil y llevaría el peso de su vida en los brazos. Tenía que caminar como pudiera con aquella carga a cuestas.

Capítulo LXXXII

Mi pesadumbre la tengo delante y la alegría detrás.

SHAKESPEARE, *Sonetos*

Los exiliados se alimentan en gran parte de esperanzas, y es poco probable que permanezcan en el destierro si no se los obliga. Cuando Will Ladislaw abandonó voluntariamente Middlemarch no puso otro obstáculo para regresar que su propia decisión de no hacerlo, decisión que no era en modo alguno una barrera de hierro, sino tan solo un estado de ánimo susceptible de participar en un minué con otros estados de ánimo y de acabar haciendo inclinaciones de cabeza, sonriendo y cediendo el sitio con cortés naturalidad. A medida que pasaban los meses, cada vez le parecía más difícil explicarse las razones que le impedían hacer una visita a Middlemarch, sin otra perspectiva que la esperanza de tener alguna noticia de Dorothea; y si en semejante visita relámpago pudiera, por alguna extraña coincidencia, hablar con ella, no había por qué avergonzarse de un viaje inocente que antes consideraba deber suyo no emprender. Puesto que se hallaba separado de ella sin remisión, tenía derecho a acercarse a su lugar de residencia; y en cuanto a los parientes suspicaces que montaban guardia como dragones… con el paso del tiempo y el cambio de aires, sus opiniones le iban pareciendo cada vez menos importantes.

Y, además, había surgido un motivo que no tenía nada que ver con Dorothea y que convertía aquel viaje en un deber filantrópico, por así decirlo. Will se había interesado, sin afán de lucro, por un nuevo proyecto de colonización del Lejano Oeste, y la necesidad de conseguir fondos para llevar a cabo tan generosa idea le había hecho plantearse la posibilidad de aceptar el ofrecimiento de Bulstrode y utilizar aquel dinero como medio para sacar adelante un proyecto con grandes probabilidades de ser muy beneficioso. Will, de todas formas, no acababa de verlo claro, y su repugnancia a tener nuevos tratos con el banquero le habría llevado a abandonar en seguida el proyecto, si no hubiera surgido en su imaginación la idea de que con una visita a Middlemarch se formaría una opinión más ajustada a la realidad.

Tal era el motivo que se dio a sí mismo para justificar el viaje. Su intención era consultar el problema con Lydgate y analizar en su compañía la cuestión económica, al mismo tiempo que pensaba divertirse, durante las breves veladas de su estancia, con abundancia de música y bromas con la bella Rosamond, sin descuidar a sus amigos de la rectoría de Lowick; que la rectoría estuviese cerca de Lowick Manor no era culpa suya. Antes de marcharse de Middlemarch se había distanciado un poco de los Farebrother, obligado por el orgullo a evitar cualquier sospecha de que buscaba indirectamente entrevistarse con Dorothea; pero el hambre nos domestica y Will sentía verdadera necesidad de ver nuevamente a cierta persona y de oír cierta voz. Nada lograba calmar aquella hambre: ni la ópera, ni la conversación con políticos entusiastas, ni la halagüeña recepción (en círculos más bien minoritarios) de su nuevo estilo en la redacción de artículos de fondo.

De manera que había emprendido el viaje con la previsión, con el convencimiento, de que casi todo seguiría igual en aquel pequeño mundo que tan bien conocía; casi con el temor de que no encontraría ninguna novedad. Halló, sin embargo, Middlemarch en una situación terriblemente dinámica, en la que incluso las bromas y el entusiasmo por la lírica se habían vuelto explosivos; y el primer día de su visita se convirtió en el más amargo de su vida. A la mañana siguiente se sintió tan hostigado por la pesadilla de las consecuencias —temía tanto los resultados inmediatos— que al presenciar la llegada de la diligencia de Riverston mientras desayunaba, salió a toda prisa y tomó asiento en su interior, para verse libre, al menos

por un día, de la necesidad de tener que hacer o que decir algo en Middlemarch. Will Ladislaw se encontraba en una de esas crisis laberínticas que son más comunes de lo que cabría imaginar si nos fiásemos del carácter superficialmente categórico de los juicios humanos. Había hallado a Lydgate, por quien sentía sincero respeto, bajo circunstancias que reclamaban la más total y manifiesta de las simpatías; y la razón de que, a pesar de aquel deber, fuera deseable evitar toda intimidad futura, o incluso contacto, con él, era precisamente una que hacía imposible en la práctica comportarse de aquel modo. Para una persona del temperamento impresionable de Will —sin ninguna zona de neutralidad indiferente en su carácter, dispuesto a convertir todo lo que le acontecía en los choques violentos de un drama apasionado— la revelación de que Rosamond, de algún modo, hiciera depender de él su felicidad, era un problema que su explosión de cólera había agrandado inconmensurablemente. Le desagradaba mucho ser tan cruel, si bien temía mostrar la profundidad de su arrepentimiento: era preciso volver de nuevo junto a ella; la amistad no podía terminar bruscamente y la infelicidad de Rosamond era una fuerza que le atemorizaba. Y mientras tanto quedaban en su vida tan pocas perspectivas de alegría como si le hubieran amputado las piernas y tuviera que aprender a andar con muletas. Por la noche estuvo considerando si no debería tomar la diligencia, no camino de Riverston, sino de Londres, dejando una nota para Lydgate que explicara con cualquier excusa su desaparición. Pero existían fuertes ataduras que hacían muy difícil aquella partida tan brusca: el agostamiento de su felicidad al pensar en Dorothea, la destrucción de su esperanza más honda, que había seguido viva a pesar de la reconocida necesidad de renunciar a ella, era todavía una herida demasiado viva para resignarse y volver directamente a un destierro que no sería más que otro nombre para la desesperación.

De manera que se limitó a tomar la diligencia de Riverston. Volvió en ella cuando aún era de día, resuelto a ir a casa de Lydgate por la noche. El Rubicón, como sabemos, era una corriente de agua de muy poca entidad; su importancia dependía enteramente de ciertas condiciones invisibles. Will se sintió forzado a cruzar un determinado confín y lo que divisaba más allá no era un imperio, sino una sujeción llena de descontento.

Pero a veces se nos permite, incluso en la vida cotidiana, ser testigos de la influencia benéfica de una noble personalidad, de la divina eficacia liberadora que puede encerrar una acción desinteresada de amor a los demás. Si Dorothea, después de su noche de angustia, no hubiese ido a ver a Rosamond, quizá habría llegado a ser una mujer especialmente elogiada por su discreción, pero el resultado habría sido mucho menos favorable para las tres personas reunidas en casa de Lydgate en torno al hogar de una chimenea a las siete y media de aquella tarde.

Rosamond estaba preparada para la visita de Will, y lo recibió con una lánguida frialdad que Lydgate atribuyó a su agotamiento nervioso, agotamiento que en ningún caso suponía relacionado con Will. Y como no decía nada, inclinada sobre la labor de costura, su marido la disculpó inocentemente de forma indirecta suplicándole que se recostara y descansase. Will se sentía muy despreciable representando el papel de amigo que hacía su primera aparición y saludaba por primera vez a Rosamond mientras cavilaba sobre sus sentimientos desde la escena del día anterior, escena que parecía unirlos inexorablemente, como si fuera la dolorosa visión de una doble locura. No hizo falta que Lydgate abandonara la habitación, porque cuando Rosamond sirvió el té y Will se acercó para recoger su taza, le había colocado un papelito doblado en el platillo. Él lo vio y se lo guardó de inmediato, sin sentir el menor deseo de examinar su contenido hasta que se halló de nuevo en su alojamiento. Lo que Rosamond le dijese por escrito intensificaría las penosas impresiones de la velada. De todas formas desdobló el papel y lo leyó a la luz de la vela junto a la cama. Solo había unas pocas palabras en la caligrafía suelta y elegante de su amiga:

> Se lo he contado todo a la señora Casaubon. Se han desvanecido sus falsas ideas acerca de usted. Se lo digo porque vino a verme y fue muy amable conmigo. Ya no tiene usted nada que reprocharme. Lo que pasó ayer no cambia nada para usted.

El efecto de aquellas palabras no fue enteramente de alegría. Mientras las repasaba dando rienda suelta a la imaginación, Will notó que le ardían las mejillas y las orejas al pensar en lo que había ocurrido entre Dorothea y Rosamond… Y al surgirle la duda de que quizá ni siquiera la más favorable explicación de su comportamiento bastase para que la señora Casaubon no se sintiera herida en su dignidad. Quizá su relación con él había sufrido un cambio irremediable… una transformación definitiva. Muy pronto llegó a sentirse tan lleno de dudas como un hombre que se ha salvado de un naufragio, pero se encuentra de noche en una costa desconocida. Hasta la malhadada mañana del día anterior —con la excepción del momento de desazón mucho tiempo antes, en la misma habitación y en presencia de la misma persona— todas sus

visiones, todas las ideas compartidas por los dos habían existido en un mundo aparte, donde la luz del sol se derramaba sobre altos lirios blancos, donde no acechaba ningún mal y donde no entraba ninguna otra persona. Pero ahora… ¿volvería Dorothea a acompañarle en aquel mundo?

Capítulo LXXXIII

Y ahora buenos días a nuestras almas que despiertan
y no se miran por temor;
pues el amor domina todo deseo de otras cosas,
y hace de una estancia pequeña un infinito.

JOHN DONNE

La segunda mañana después de visitar a Rosamond, y tras dos noches de sueño reparador, la dueña de Lowick Manor no solo había descansado bien, sino que se notaba en posesión de grandes cantidades de energías superfluas, es decir, más de las que era capaz de concentrar en ninguna ocupación. El día anterior Dorothea había dado largos paseos fuera de sus propiedades y hecho dos visitas a la rectoría: pero nunca llegó a decirle a nadie por qué empleó el tiempo de manera tan infructuosa, y a la mañana siguiente estaba muy enfadada consigo misma por aquel desasosiego infantil. Decidió comportarse de manera distinta. ¿Qué había que hacer en el pueblo? ¡Vaya por Dios! Nada. Todo el mundo estaba bien y tenía ropa de franela; a nadie se le había muerto el cerdo; y era sábado por la mañana, cuando se llevaba a cabo una limpieza general de suelos y zaguanes, por lo que resultaba inútil ir a la escuela. Pero había varios asuntos que Dorothea estaba tratando de aclarar y decidió consagrarse con gran energía al más serio de todos. Se instaló en la biblioteca delante de su pequeña colección de libros sobre economía política y materias afines, con los que trataba de arrojar luz sobre la mejor manera de gastar dinero sin perjudicar a los vecinos, o —lo que viene a ser lo mismo— haciéndoles todo el bien posible. Era un asunto de mucha trascendencia y, si lograra enfrascarse en él, conseguiría apaciguar su imaginación. Desgraciadamente sus pensamientos vagabundearon por espacio de una hora, y al final se halló leyendo las mismas frases dos veces, percatándose con claridad de muchas cosas, pero no de los razonamientos contenidos en el texto. Tarea imposible. ¿Debería pedir el coche y marchar a Tipton? No; por alguna razón prefería quedarse en Lowick. En cualquier caso debía refrenar su espíritu errabundo: la autodisciplina era un arte; y estuvo dando vueltas y más vueltas por la biblioteca de colores apagados considerando con qué tipo de maniobra lograría detener sus desbocados pensamientos. Quizá una tarea sencilla fuese el mejor remedio… algo que requiriese tenacidad. ¿Por qué no la geografía de Asia Menor, cuestión en la que el señor Casaubon la había acusado muchas veces de negligencia? Fue al armario donde se guardaban los mapas y desenrolló uno: por fin podría asegurarse de que Paflagonia no se hallaba en la costa del Mediterráneo y rectificar su total ignorancia sobre los cálibes, anclando firmemente su tribu en las costas del Mar Negro. Un mapa era un excelente objeto de estudio cuando se estaba dispuesto a pensar en otra cosa, ya que los nombres propios podían convertirse en cantinela si se repetían varias veces. Dorothea se puso a trabajar seriamente, inclinándose mucho sobre el mapa y pronunciando las palabras con voz audible, aunque baja, que muchas veces se transformaba en sonsonete. Después de todas sus dramáticas experiencias, la señora Casaubon resultaba divertidamente juvenil mientras movía la cabeza y trataba, ayudada por los dedos de una mano, de recordar todos los nombres con un pequeño fruncimiento de labios y una interrupción de vez en cuando para llevarse las manos a la cabeza y decir: «¡Vaya por Dios! ¡Vaya por Dios!».

No había motivo para que aquella ocupación no se prolongara como las incesantes vueltas y más vueltas de un carrusel; pero finalmente se vio interrumpida al abrirse la puerta para que el criado anunciara la visita de la señorita Noble.

La diminuta anciana, cuyo sombrero apenas llegaba al hombro de Dorothea, recibió una cálida

bienvenida, pero mientras su mano descansaba entre las de la señora Casaubon emitió muchos de sus ruiditos inarticulados, como si tuviera algo difícil que decir.

—Siéntese, haga el favor —dijo Dorothea, acercándole una silla—. ¿Se me necesita para algo? Me gustaría mucho poder ayudar.

—Me voy en seguida —dijo la señorita Noble, metiendo la mano en su pequeño cesto y jugueteando nerviosamente con algún objeto que tenía dentro—; me está esperando un amigo en el patio de la iglesia. —Inmediatamente recayó en los sonidos inarticulados y sin darse cuenta extrajo del cesto el objeto al que daba vueltas con la mano. Era la cajita de carey para sus pastillas y Dorothea sintió cómo le subía el color a las mejillas—. Es el señor Ladislaw —continuó la tímida anciana—. Teme haberla ofendido y me ha suplicado que le pregunte si querrá verlo unos minutos.

Dorothea no respondió inmediatamente: se le acababa de ocurrir que no podía recibirlo en aquella biblioteca, donde la prohibición de su marido parecía seguir aún presente. Miró hacia la ventana. ¿No sería mejor salir de la casa y verle en el jardín? Pero el cielo estaba cubierto y los árboles habían empezado a estremecerse como si se acercara una tormenta. Además, no se atrevía a salir a buscarlo.

—Haga el favor de recibirlo, señora Casaubon —dijo la anciana, con entonación patética—; de lo contrario, tendré que decirle: «No», y lo sentirá mucho.

—Sí —dijo Dorothea—. Dígale que venga.

¿Qué otra cosa podía hacer? Lo único que anhelaba en aquel momento era ver a Will: la posibilidad de estar con él se había interpuesto de manera continua entre ella y cualquier otra actividad; sin embargo, sentía una emoción palpitante, algo parecido a un toque de alarma… la sensación de hacer por él algo audazmente desafiante.

Cuando la diminuta señora se alejó para cumplir con su misión, Dorothea permaneció en el centro de la biblioteca con las manos juntas, sin hacer ningún intento de adoptar una actitud despreocupada. De lo que menos conciencia tenía era precisamente de su propio cuerpo: meditaba sobre lo que Will podría estar pensando en aquel momento, y de la hostilidad que otras personas sentían hacia él. ¿Cómo podía explicarse que el deber la obligara a ser cruel? Oponerse al desprecio injustificado formaba parte de sus sentimientos desde el primer momento y ahora, al reaccionar después de la angustia sufrida, aquel sentimiento tenía más fuerza que nunca. «Si lo quiero demasiado es porque lo han tratado muy mal»: una voz en su interior le decía aquello a un público imaginario cuando se abrió la puerta y tuvo a Will delante.

Dorothea no se movió, y él se dirigió hacia ella con mayor incertidumbre y timidez que nunca. Las dudas le hacían temer que cualquier mirada o palabra pudiera crear una nueva distancia entre los dos; y a Dorothea le daba miedo su propia emoción. Parecía como si un encantamiento la paralizase, impidiéndole separar las manos, mientras un anhelo muy vivo e intenso permanecía prisionero dentro de sus ojos. Al ver que no le ofrecía la mano como de costumbre, Will se detuvo como a un metro de distancia y dijo desconcertado:

—Le estoy muy agradecido por recibirme.

—Quería verlo —respondió Dorothea, incapaz de decir otra cosa. No se le ocurrió sentarse y Will interpretó desfavorablemente aquella regia manera de recibirlo; pero procedió a decir lo que se había propuesto:

—Me temo que me considere usted imprudente e incluso que me censure por haberme atrevido a volver tan pronto. Mi impaciencia me ha castigado. Está usted al corriente (todo el mundo lo sabe ya) de una triste historia acerca de mi ascendencia. Yo lo supe antes de marcharme, y siempre tuve intención de contárselo… si volvíamos a vernos. —Hubo un ligero movimiento por parte de Dorothea, que separó las manos, pero volvió a cruzarlas de inmediato—. Todo el asunto se ha convertido ya en tema de habladurías —continuó Will—. Quería contarle que algo relacionado con ello… algo que sucedió antes de que me marchara, ha ayudado a traerme aquí de nuevo. Al menos me ha hecho creer que justificaba mi regreso. Mi idea era conseguir que Bulstrode invirtiera algún dinero en un proyecto público… un dinero que se había ofrecido a darme. Quizá sea un punto a favor de Bulstrode que, privadamente, se ofreciera a compensarme por un viejo agravio: quería darme una buena renta a modo de compensación; pero supongo que está usted al tanto de esa desagradable historia. —Will miró dubitativamente a Dorothea, aunque empezaba ya a adoptar la actitud desafiante con que pensaba siempre sobre aquella parte de su historia personal. En seguida añadió —: Se da usted cuenta de que todo ello me resulta muy penoso.

—Sí… sí… lo sé —respondió Dorothea, precipitadamente.

—Preferí no aceptar esa restitución. Estaba seguro de que usted no tendría buena opinión de mí si lo hacía —dijo Will. ¿Para qué decirle una cosa así? Dorothea sabía que había confesado su amor por ella—. Eso fue lo que pensé. —Se interrumpió, a pesar de todo.

—Obró usted como yo habría esperado que lo hiciera —dijo Dorothea, con el rostro iluminado y la cabeza un poco más erguida aún sobre su hermoso cuello.

—Estaba convencido de que usted no permitiría que las circunstancias de mi nacimiento le crearan prejuicios contra mí, aunque otros pensaran de manera distinta —dijo Will, echando la cabeza hacia atrás, como solía hacerlo en otro tiempo y mirándola a los ojos con expresión suplicante.

—Otra dificultad más solo sería un nuevo motivo para no abandonarlo —dijo Dorothea con vehemencia —. Nada podría haberme hecho cambiar, excepto… —el corazón le latía con fuerza y le resultaba difícil continuar; tuvo que hacer un gran esfuerzo para decir en voz baja y trémula— excepto descubrir que fuese usted distinto… no tan bueno como yo le he creído siempre.

—Siempre me considerará usted mejor de lo que soy en todo excepto en una cosa —dijo Will, dando rienda suelta a sus sentimientos ante la manifestación de los de Dorothea—. Me refiero a serle fiel. Cuando creí que dudaba usted de mí, dejó de importarme todo lo demás. Pensé que mi vida había terminado, que ya no me quedaba ninguna aspiración… tan solo cosas que soportar.

—Ya no dudo de usted —dijo Dorothea, extendiendo la mano; un vago temor la impulsó a manifestar de algún modo su inexpresable afecto.

Él le tomó la mano y se la llevó a los labios con algo muy parecido a un sollozo. Pero seguía llevando el sombrero y los guantes en la otra mano, y hubiera podido servir de modelo para el retrato de un monárquico[143]. Con todo, era difícil liberar aquella mano y Dorothea, retirándola con una turbación que lamentó acto seguido, desvió la vista y se alejó.

—Fíjese en qué oscuras se han vuelto las nubes y en cómo el viento zarandea los árboles —dijo, avanzando hacia la ventana, pero hablando y moviéndose sin darse apenas cuenta de lo que hacía.

Will la siguió desde lejos y se apoyó contra el alto respaldo de un sillón de cuero, en el que ya se atrevió a depositar el sombrero y los guantes, librándose así del intolerable cautiverio protocolario al que por primera vez se había visto condenado en presencia de Dorothea. Hay que confesar que, en aquel momento, apoyado en el sillón, se sentía muy feliz. Apenas le asustaba ya lo que Dorothea pudiera sentir.

Guardaron silencio, sin mirarse, pero contemplando los árboles agitados por el viento, que mostraban el pálido envés de sus hojas contra un cielo cada vez más oscuro. Will nunca había disfrutado tanto ante la perspectiva de una tormenta: aquella le liberaba de la necesidad de marcharse. Hojas y pequeñas ramas se movían de un lado para otro y los truenos se acercaban. Cada vez había menos luz, pero el resplandor de un relámpago los hizo sobresaltarse y mirarse y sonreír a continuación. Dorothea empezó a hablar de lo que había estado pensando.

—No debiera usted decir que no le quedaría ninguna aspiración. Si nosotros hubiésemos perdido nuestro bien más importante, aún seguiría existiendo el bien de otros y esa es una aspiración que siempre merece la pena. Algunas personas pueden ser felices. Me pareció verlo con más claridad que nunca cuando me sentía muy desgraciada. No sé cómo habría sobrevivido si ese sentimiento no hubiese venido a darme fuerza.

—Usted nunca ha experimentado un sufrimiento como el mío —dijo Will—; el sufrimiento de saber que usted me despreciaba.

—Pero lo mío ha sido peor… era peor pensar mal de… —Dorothea había empezado a hablar impetuosamente, pero se detuvo.

Will enrojeció. Tenía la sensación de que todo lo que ella decía lo expresaba desde la perspectiva de la adversidad que los separaba. Guardó silencio un momento y luego dijo con pasión:

—Podemos tener al menos el consuelo de hablarnos sin disimulo. Puesto que debo marcharme… puesto que hemos de estar siempre separados… piense en mí como en alguien al borde de la tumba.

Mientras hablaba, el intenso resplandor de un relámpago hizo que los dos se vieran con gran claridad, y la luz dio la impresión de ser el terror de un amor sin esperanza. Dorothea se apartó al instante de la ventana; Will la siguió, tomándole la mano casi con brusquedad; y así se quedaron, las manos unidas, como dos niños, contemplando la tormenta, mientras el trueno producía un tremendo estrépito que se prolongó por encima de sus cabezas; inmediatamente empezó a llover con gran violencia. Luego se volvieron para mirarse, muy presente el recuerdo de las últimas palabras de Will, aún con las manos entrelazadas.

—No tengo ninguna esperanza —dijo Will—. Aunque me quisiera tanto como yo la quiero… aunque lo fuese todo para usted… lo más probable es que no deje nunca de ser pobre: si se miran las cosas fríamente solo cabe contar con un futuro humilde. Es imposible que seamos el uno para el otro. Quizá haya sido una vileza por mi parte pedirle una palabra de aliento. Tenía intención de marcharme sin decir nada, pero no he sido capaz de cumplir mi propósito.

—No lo sienta —dijo Dorothea, con voz firme y tierna al mismo tiempo—. Prefiero compartir todo el dolor de nuestra despedida.

Le tembló la boca y lo mismo le sucedió a él. Nunca se supo qué labios fueron los primeros en acercarse a los otros; pero se besaron trémulamente y luego volvieron a separarse.

La lluvia se lanzaba contra los cristales de las ventanas como si llevara dentro un espíritu colérico; detrás venían las violentas arremetidas del viento; era uno de esos momentos en que tanto el trabajador como el ocioso hacen una pausa y sienten algo muy parecido a un temor reverente.

Dorothea se sentó en una larga otomana de poca altura en el centro de la habitación y, con las manos entrelazadas sobre el regazo, contempló el melancólico mundo exterior. Will se quedó mirándola un momento, luego se sentó a su lado y puso su mano sobre la de ella, que se dio la vuelta para que él la estrechara. Así estuvieron, sin mirarse, hasta que disminuyó la violencia del aguacero. Ninguno de los dos era capaz de expresar todo lo que pensaba.

Al calmarse la lluvia, Dorothea se volvió para mirar a Will. Con una apasionada exclamación, como si le amenazara algún instrumento de tortura, él se levantó precipitadamente y dijo:

—¡Es imposible!

Fue de nuevo a apoyarse en el respaldo del sillón y pareció luchar contra su propia cólera, mientras ella lo miraba tristemente.

—Es algo tan definitivo como un asesinato o cualquier otra catástrofe que separa a las personas —estalló de nuevo—; es incluso más intolerable aún… mutilar nuestras vidas por cosas insignificantes.

—No… no digas eso… tu vida no tiene por qué verse mutilada —dijo Dorothea dulcemente.

—Sí; no hay otro remedio —dijo Will con gesto airado—. Es cruel que hables de esa manera… como si existiera algún consuelo. Quizá tú sepas ver más allá de este dolor, pero yo no soy capaz. Es cruel hablar de esa manera ante la realidad de los hechos… significa rechazar mi amor como si fuera una cosa sin importancia. Nunca podremos casarnos.

—Quizá podamos… alguna vez —dijo Dorothea con voz temblorosa.

—¿Cuándo? —dijo Will, con amargura—. ¿De qué sirve imaginar que yo tenga éxito? Nunca conseguiré otra cosa que mantenerme con modestia, a no ser que decida vender mi pluma y ser el portavoz de otros. Eso lo veo con toda claridad. No estoy en condiciones de casarme, incluso aunque mi mujer no tuviera que renunciar a ningún lujo.

Se produjo un silencio. El corazón de Dorothea estaba lleno de algo que quería decir y, sin embargo, las palabras resultaban demasiado difíciles. Pero se sentía totalmente poseída por ellas: en aquel momento el debate había cesado en su interior. Y era muy duro que no pudiera decir lo que quería decir. Will miraba contrariado por la ventana. Si no se hubiera apartado de su lado, Dorothea creía que todo habría sido más fácil. Will se volvió por fin, apoyado aún contra el respaldo del sillón, extendió la mano maquinalmente hacia el sombrero, y dijo con algo semejante a la exasperación en la voz:

—Adiós.

—No puedo soportarlo… se me romperá el corazón —exclamó Dorothea, alzándose del asiento, con el torrente de su pasión juvenil rompiendo todos los obstáculos que la habían obligado a guardar silencio… con lágrimas copiosas llenándole los ojos y resbalándole en un instante por las mejillas—. No me importa ser pobre… detesto la riqueza.

Will estuvo en seguida a su lado, rodeándola con los brazos, pero ella echó la cabeza hacia atrás y le apartó suavemente para poder seguir hablando, los ojos llenos de grandes lágrimas, mirándolo con gran sencillez, mientras decía con voz sollozante e infantil:

—Podemos vivir muy bien con mi fortuna personal… Es muchísimo… setecientas libras al año… necesito muy pocas cosas… no me hace falta ropa nueva… y aprenderé el precio de todo.

Capítulo LXXXIV

Aunque viejos y jóvenes digan,
que la culpa es mía,
censúreselos a ellos,
que hablaron tanto
en deshonra mía.

The Not-Browne Mayde

Fue inmediatamente después de que los lores hubiesen rechazado la ley de la reforma electoral: eso explica que el señor Cadwallader estuviese paseando por el jardín, cerca del gran invernadero de Freshitt Hall, las manos a la espalda sujetando el *Times*, mientras hablaba con sir James Chettam sobre el futuro del país con todo el desapasionamiento de un pescador de truchas. La señora Cadwallader, la anciana lady Chettam y Celia estaban unas veces sentadas en las sillas del jardín y otras caminando para reunirse con el pequeño Arthur, al que se paseaba en su carroza y que, como corresponde a un Buda infantil, estaba resguardado por un parasol sagrado con hermosa orla de seda.

También las señoras hablaban de política, aunque con más interrupciones. La señora Cadwallader insistía en que era cierta la noticia de la creación de nuevos pares del reino: estaba enterada por su primo de que Truberry se había pasado al otro bando a instigación de su mujer, que notó el aroma de los títulos en el aire desde la primera vez que surgió la cuestión de la reforma y que vendería su alma con tal de tener precedencia sobre su hermana menor, que se había casado con un baronet. Lady Chettam consideró que semejante conducta era muy censurable y recordó que la madre de la señora Truberry no era más que la señorita Walsingham de Melspring. Celia confesó que era más agradable ser «lady» que «señora» y que a Dodo nunca le importaba la precedencia con tal de hacer lo que quería. La señora Cadwallader mantuvo que era una pobre satisfacción disfrutar de precedencia cuando quienes rodeaban a esa persona sabían que no había en sus venas una gota de sangre noble; y Celia, de nuevo, deteniéndose para mirar a Arthur, dijo:

—Estaría muy bien, sin embargo, que fuera vizconde… ¡con el dientecito de su señoría a punto de salir! Habría podido, si James hubiera sido conde.

—Mi querida Celia —dijo lady Chettam—, el título de James vale mucho más que el de cualquiera de esos condes recién creados. Nunca deseé que su padre fuese otra cosa que sir James.

—Solo me refería al dientecito de Arthur —dijo Celia, feliz en su maternidad—. Miren, ahí viene mi tío.

Aceleró el paso para recibir al señor Brooke, mientras sir James y el señor Cadwallader se incorporaban al grupo de las señoras. Celia había cogido del brazo a su tío, que le dio unos golpecitos en la mano y dejó escapar un «¡Bueno, querida!» bastante melancólico. Mientras los demás se acercaban, quedó patente que el señor Brooke parecía abatido, pero eso podía explicarse de manera convincente por el estado de la política; y mientras, una tras otra, iba estrechando manos sin añadir otro saludo que un «Bien, están todos aquí, como puede verse», el rector dijo, riendo amablemente:

—No se tome tan a pecho la derrota de la ley, Brooke; tiene usted de su parte a toda la gentuza del país.

—La reforma, ¿eh? —respondió el señor Brooke, con cierta turbación en los modales—. Derrotada, dense cuenta. Los lores han ido demasiado lejos. Tendrán que parar. Malas noticias, óiganme lo que les digo. Quiero decir aquí, en casa… muy malas noticias. Pero no debe usted culparme, Chettam.

—¿Qué sucede? —dijo sir James—. Espero que no sea otro guardabosque herido de bala. Aunque es lo que cabía esperar cuando un tipo como Trapping Bass sale tan bien librado.

—¿Guardabosque? No, no. Entremos; se lo contaré todo en la casa, si no les importa —dijo el señor Brooke, haciendo un gesto con la cabeza a los Cadwallader, para indicar que también ellos estaban incluidos en sus confidencias—. Y lo de cazadores furtivos como Trapping Bass, ya sabe usted, Chettam —continuó, mientras entraban en Freshitt Hall—; cuando sea magistrado descubrirá que no es tan fácil condenar. La severidad está muy bien, pero resulta mucho más llevadera cuando se tiene a otra persona que la aplique por uno. También usted tiene su corazoncito, no sé si se da cuenta… no es usted un Dracón, ni un Jeffreys[144], ni nada parecido.

El señor Brooke estaba sin duda muy agitado. Cuando tenía algo penoso que contar, solía preparar el terreno con un considerable número de detalles irrelevantes, como si tratara de disimular el sabor de una medicina mezclándola con otras cosas. Siguió charlando con sir James sobre cazadores furtivos hasta que todos estuvieron sentados y la señora Cadwallader, irritada con tanta palabrería, intervino para decir:

—Me muero por saber las malas noticias. No hay ningún guardabosque herido: eso está claro. ¿De qué se trata, entonces?

—Bien; es una cosa muy penosa, dense cuenta —dijo el señor Brooke—. Me alegro de que usted y el rector estén aquí; un asunto de familia… pero usted nos ayudará a todos a soportarlo mejor, Cadwallader. No tengo más remedio que decírtelo, querida. —Aquí el señor Brooke miró a Celia—. No puedes ni imaginarte de qué se trata. Y a usted, Chettam, le va a desagradar muchísimo… pero, dese cuenta, no estaba en su mano evitarlo, como tampoco he podido hacerlo yo. Sucede algo peculiar con las cosas: acaban dándose la vuelta, no sé si me entienden.

—Tiene que ser Dodo —dijo Celia, acostumbrada a pensar en su hermana como la pieza peligrosa de la maquinaria familiar. Se había sentado en un taburete bajo, apoyándose en las rodillas de su marido.

—¡Por el amor de Dios, díganos de qué se trata! —exclamó sir James.

—Bueno, ya sabe, Chettam, que no pude hacer nada con el testamento de Casaubon: era el tipo de testamento que solo consigue empeorar las cosas.

—Exactamente —dijo sir James, muy deprisa—. Pero ¿qué es lo que ha empeorado?

—Dorothea va a volver a casarse —dijo el señor Brooke, haciendo un gesto con la cabeza en dirección a Celia, que inmediatamente miró a su marido, asustada, y le puso una mano en la rodilla.

Sir James palideció de ira, pero no habló.

—¡Cielo santo! —exclamó la señora Cadwallader—. ¿No será con el joven Ladislaw?

El señor Brooke asintió, diciendo:

—Sí, con Ladislaw. —Y a continuación guardó un silencio prudencial.

—¿Te das cuenta, Humphrey? —dijo la señora Cadwallader, agitando el brazo en dirección a su marido —. La próxima vez admitirás que tengo cierta capacidad para prever las cosas; aunque quizá me sigas llevando la contraria con la misma ceguera de siempre. Tú suponías que ese caballerete había abandonado Inglaterra.

—Quizá lo hiciera y puede haber vuelto —dijo el rector sin perder la calma.

—¿Cuándo lo ha sabido? —preguntó sir James, poco deseoso de oír a los demás, pero encontrando muy difícil hablar él mismo.

—Ayer —dijo el señor Brooke, mansamente—. Fui a Lowick. Dorothea me mandó llamar, ¿comprenden? Había sucedido muy de repente… ninguno de ellos tenía la menor idea hace dos días… ni se lo imaginaban, dense cuenta. Sucede algo peculiar con las cosas. Y Dorothea está decidida, no serviría de nada oponerse. Le hablé con toda claridad. Cumplí con mi deber, Chettam. Pero Dorothea puede hacer lo que quiera, ya sabe.

—Más valdría que lo hubiera retado y matado de un tiro hace un año —dijo sir James, no porque tuviera inclinaciones sanguinarias, sino porque sentía la necesidad de decir algo muy violento.

—Por favor, James, eso hubiera sido muy desagradable —dijo Celia.

—Sea razonable, Chettam. Mire este asunto con más calma —dijo el señor Cadwallader, pesaroso de ver a un amigo de tan buen carácter dominado por la cólera.

—No es nada fácil para una persona que tenga un poco de dignidad… un mínimo sentido de lo que está bien… cuando el asunto afecta a su propia familia —dijo sir James, todavía con la indignación al rojo vivo —. Es por completo escandaloso. Si Ladislaw tuviera una pizca de honor habría salido del país inmediatamente, para no volver nunca a poner los pies en él. Sin embargo, no estoy sorprendido. Al día siguiente del funeral de Casaubon dije qué era lo que se debía hacer. Pero no se me escuchó.

—Quería usted una cosa imposible, Chettam, no sé si se da cuenta —dijo el señor Brooke—. Quería que nos deshiciéramos de él. Ya le dije que con Ladislaw no podíamos hacer lo que quisiéramos: tenía sus propias ideas. Era un tipo muy notable… siempre dije que era un tipo notable.

—Sí —dijo sir James, incapaz de reprimir una crítica—, es ciertamente una lástima que se formara usted

tan buena opinión de él. A ello debemos que se quedara a vivir por aquí. A ello debemos el espectáculo de ver degradarse a una mujer como Dorothea casándose con él. —Sir James hacía pequeñas pausas entre frases, porque las palabras no le salían con facilidad—. Un hombre tan señalado por el testamento de su marido que la simple delicadeza debería haberle impedido volver a verlo… que la saca de la posición social que le corresponde por derecho… para llevarla a la pobreza… un hombre que comete la ruindad de aceptar semejante sacrificio… que ha tenido siempre una ocupación muy poco conveniente… y que, en mi opinión, es una persona sin principios y de carácter veleidoso. Eso es lo que yo pienso —concluyó sir James con gran energía, volviéndose hacia un lado y cruzando las piernas.

—Todo eso se lo he hecho ver a Dorothea —dijo el señor Brooke en tono de disculpa—. Me refiero a la pobreza y a descender de posición social. Le dije: «Querida, tú no sabes lo que es vivir con setecientas libras al año, no tener coche y todas esas cosas y vivir entre personas que no saben quién eres». Se lo he dicho con toda claridad. Pero le aconsejo que hable usted mismo con Dorothea. La verdad es que no le gustan las propiedades de Casaubon. Ya verá lo que dice, se lo aseguro.

—No… discúlpeme… no lo haré —dijo sir James acentuando la frialdad—. No soporto la idea de volver a verla; me resultaría muy penoso. Me duele demasiado que una mujer como Dorothea haga algo que está tan mal.

—Sea justo, Chettam —dijo el complaciente rector de labios gruesos, que no estaba de acuerdo con tanto enfado innecesario—. Quizá la señora Casaubon actúe de manera poco prudente: renuncia a una fortuna por un hombre, y nosotros los varones tenemos tan mala opinión unos de otros que casi nunca llamamos prudente a una mujer que hace una cosa así. Pero creo que no debería usted condenarlo como una mala acción en el sentido estricto de la palabra.

—Sí que lo hago —respondió sir James—. Creo que Dorothea comete una mala acción casándose con Ladislaw.

—Mi querido amigo, todos tenemos bastante tendencia a considerar mala una acción porque nos resulta desagradable —dijo el rector, con gran calma. Como muchos hombres que se toman la vida con tranquilidad, de cuando en cuando el señor Cadwallader tenía la virtud de decir a aquellos que se consideraban virtuosamente encolerizados una verdad que daba en el blanco. Sir James sacó el pañuelo y empezó a morder una esquina.

—Pero es terrible que Dodo haga una cosa así —dijo Celia, deseosa de justificar a su marido—. Dijo que nunca se casaría de nuevo… con nadie en absoluto.

—También yo la he oído decir eso mismo —dijo lady Chettam majestuosamente, como si prestara declaración ante el tribunal supremo.

—Suele haber una silenciosa excepción en tales casos —dijo la señora Cadwallader—. Lo único que me maravilla es que se sorprendan ustedes. Nadie ha hecho nada para impedirlo. Si hubiesen invitado a lord Triton, con sus inclinaciones filantrópicas, para que la cortejara, quizá se hubieran casado antes de terminar el año. Ningún otro remedio era seguro. El señor Casaubon lo había preparado todo lo mejor posible. Se hizo desagradable (o quiso Dios hacerlo así) y luego la desafió a que lo desobedeciera. Ponerle un precio muy alto es la manera de hacer tentadora cualquier estupidez.

—No sé qué entiende usted por una mala acción, Cadwallader —dijo James, todavía sintiéndose un poco herido y volviéndose hacia el rector—. No es un hombre al que podamos recibir en nuestra familia. Hablo solo en nombre propio, claro está —continuó, evitando cuidadosamente mirar al señor Brooke—. Supongo que otros encontrarán su compañía demasiado agradable para preocuparse por el decoro.

—Bueno, compréndalo usted, Chettam —dijo el señor Brooke de buen humor, acariciándose una pierna —. No puedo volverle la espalda a Dorothea. Tengo que ser como un padre para ella hasta cierto punto. Le he dicho: «No voy a negarme a ser tu padrino de boda». Antes le había hablado con toda claridad. Pero está en mi mano desvincular la propiedad, desde luego. Costaría dinero y molestias; pero puedo hacerlo, naturalmente.

El señor Brooke hizo un gesto afirmativo con la cabeza mirando a sir James y tuvo la convicción de que ponía de manifiesto su firmeza personal, reconociendo al mismo tiempo lo que había de justificado en el enojo del baronet. Pero al mencionar un motivo del que sir James se avergonzaba, acertó con un sistema de contraataque más ingenioso de lo que creía. El núcleo principal de los sentimientos de Chettam en cuanto al matrimonio de Dorothea se debía en parte a un excusable prejuicio, o incluso justificable opinión, y en parte a una antipatía basada en los celos, apenas menor en el caso de Will que en el de Casaubon. Estaba convencido de que semejante matrimonio sería fatal para Dorothea. Pero junto a aquel núcleo existía otro elemento que, para un hombre bueno y honorable como él, resultaba difícil incluso confesarse a sí mismo: no cabía duda de que la unión de las dos propiedades colindantes —Tipton y Freshitt— era una perspectiva

que le halagaba pensando en su hijo y heredero. De aquí que sir James se sintiera repentinamente avergonzado, se le hiciera un nudo en la garganta e incluso se ruborizara cuando el señor Brooke, con sus movimientos de cabeza, hizo referencia a aquel motivo. El baronet había encontrado una nueva elocuencia en la primera explosión de su cólera, pero el intento propiciatorio del señor Brooke contribuyó de forma mucho más efectiva a paralizarle la lengua que la cáustica insinuación del señor Cadwallader.

Celia se alegró de encontrar un hueco para hablar después de la referencia hecha por su tío a la ceremonia matrimonial y dijo, aunque con tan escaso interés en el tono de voz como si se tratara de una pregunta sobre una invitación para cenar:

—¿Quieres decir que Dodo se va a casar en seguida, tío?

—Dentro de tres semanas —dijo el señor Brooke, con entonación fatalista—. No puedo hacer nada por impedirlo, Cadwallader —añadió, volviéndose, en busca de un poco de comprensión, hacia el rector, el cual dijo:

—Yo no haría ninguna alharaca. Si a la señora Casaubon le gusta ser pobre, es asunto suyo. Nadie diría nada si se casara con ese joven por ser rico. Muchos clérigos beneficiados son más pobres que ellos. Aquí está Elinor —continuó el marido, a quien le gustaba irritar en broma a su mujer—, que disgustó a sus deudos casándose conmigo: yo no llegaba a las mil libras al año… era un patán… nadie veía nada bueno en mí… los zapatos que llevaba no estaban bien hechos… todos los hombres se preguntaban cómo podía gustarle a una mujer. No tengo otro remedio que ponerme de parte de Ladislaw hasta que oiga cosas peores de él.

—Humphrey, eso son sofismas y lo sabes perfectamente —replicó su mujer—. Todo te da lo mismo… contigo siempre se acaba en eso. ¡Como si tú no hubieras sido un Cadwallader! ¿Es que alguien supone que yo hubiera aceptado un monstruo como tú que llevara cualquier otro apellido?

—Y además clérigo —observó lady Chettam, asintiendo—. No se puede decir que Elinor haya descendido de categoría. Resulta difícil saber qué es el señor Ladislaw, ¿eh, James?

Sir James dejó escapar un pequeño gruñido, lo cual era una manera menos respetuosa que de ordinario de contestar a su madre. Celia alzó la vista hacia él como un gatito pensativo.

—¡Hay que admitir que tiene una terrible mezcla de sangres! —dijo la señora Cadwallader—. La tinta de calamar de Casaubon para empezar y luego un rebelde polaco, violinista o maestro de baile, ¿no es cierto?… y luego un viejo…

—Tonterías, Elinor —la interrumpió el rector poniéndose en pie—. Es hora de que nos vayamos.

—Después de todo, es un mozo bastante guapo —dijo la señora Cadwallader, levantándose también y deseosa de rectificar—. Es como los hermosos retratos antiguos de Crichley antes de que apareciesen los idiotas.

—Me voy con ustedes —dijo el señor Brooke, levantándose con presteza—. Mañana tienen que venir todos a cenar conmigo, ya saben… ¿eh, Celia, querida?

—Irás, ¿verdad, James? —dijo Celia, tomando de la mano a su marido.

—Claro que sí, si te apetece —dijo sir James, tirándose del chaleco, pero incapaz de devolver a su rostro una expresión de buen humor—. Es decir, si no va a haber nadie más.

—No, no, no —dijo el señor Brooke, entendiendo la condición—. Dorothea solo vendría si usted hubiese ido antes a verla.

Cuando sir James y Celia se quedaron solos, ella le dijo:

—¿Tienes inconveniente en que use el coche para ir a Lowick, James?

—¿Cómo, ahora mismo? —respondió él, un tanto sorprendido.

—Sí, es muy importante —dijo Celia.

—Recuerda que no la veré —dijo sir James.

—¿Aunque renuncie a casarse?

—¿De qué sirve decir eso?… De todos modos, como voy hacia la cuadra le diré a Briggs que prepare el coche.

Celia creía que, aunque hablar de renuncias no sirviera de mucho, sí que podía ser útil ir a Lowick para tratar de convencer a Dorothea. Durante toda su adolescencia había creído en su habilidad para influir sobre su hermana con unas palabras juiciosas dichas en el momento oportuno… abriendo una ventanita por la que la luz diurna de su buen juicio se difundiera entre las extrañas lámparas de colores que Dorothea utilizaba habitualmente para ver. Y Celia, la madre, se sentía aún más capacitada para aconsejar a una hermana sin hijos. ¿Quién podía entender a Dodo mejor que ella, o quererla con más ternura?

Dorothea, ocupada en su *boudoir*, se alegró mucho al ver tan pronto a su hermana después de la noticia de su próximo matrimonio. Había previsto, incluso con exageración, el desagrado de sus familiares, y temía

que Celia se viera obligada a mantenerse a distancia.

—¡Kitty, qué contenta estoy de verte! —dijo Dorothea radiante de alegría, poniendo las manos en los hombros de su hermana—. Casi había llegado a creer que no vendrías a verme.

—No he traído a Arthur porque tenía mucha prisa —dijo Celia, y las dos se sentaron en dos pequeñas sillas frente a frente, tocándose con las rodillas—. No sé si te das cuenta, Dodo, de que está muy mal lo que has hecho —dijo con su tranquilo tono de voz, algo gutural, y controlando con gran dominio cualquier posible atisbo de mal humor—. Nos has decepcionado a todos. Y no creo que resulte bien… nunca podrás vivir de esa manera. Y además, ¡qué va a pasar con todos tus proyectos! Estoy segura de que no has pensado en ello. James siempre estaría a tu servicio y podrías seguir haciendo lo que te apeteciera toda tu vida.

—Por el contrario, querida —dijo Dorothea—, nunca he hecho nada que me gustara. Todavía no he llevado a cabo ninguno de mis proyectos.

—Porque siempre querías cosas que no iban a resultar bien. Pero hubiesen surgido otros. Y ¿cómo vas a casarte con el señor Ladislaw, cuando todos estábamos convencidos de que no podías hacerlo? Le has dado un terrible disgusto a James. Y además, ¡es todo tan diferente de lo que ha sido siempre! Aceptaste al señor Casaubon porque tenía un alma grande y era tan viejo y tan lúgubre y tan sabio; y ahora, ¡pensar en casarte con el señor Ladislaw, que no tiene ni propiedades ni nada! Imagino que es porque estás decidida a hacerte la vida incómoda de una manera o de otra.

Dorothea se echó a reír.

—Pues es una cosa muy seria, Dodo —dijo Celia, adoptando un aire más solemne—. ¿Cómo vas a vivir? Además te irás lejos, entre gentes muy raras. Y no te veré nunca… y no te ocuparás de Arthur… cuando yo estaba convencida de que lo harías siempre…

Las escasas lágrimas de Celia habían hecho acto de presencia y le temblaban las comisuras de la boca.

—Querida Celia —dijo Dorothea, con tierna gravedad—, si no me ves nunca no será por culpa mía.

—Sí que lo será —dijo Celia, con la misma conmovedora alteración en las facciones—. ¿Cómo voy a ir a verte o hacer que vengas tú si James no lo soporta? Y es porque cree que no está bien… que estás muy equivocada, Dodo. Además tú te has equivocado siempre; solo que no se puede dejar de quererte. Y todos hacemos cábalas sobre dónde vas a vivir.

—Me voy a Londres —dijo Dorothea.

—¿Es posible que pienses en vivir siempre en una calle? Y serás muy pobre. Podría darte la mitad de mis cosas, pero ¿cómo voy a hacerlo si no te veo nunca?

—Que Dios te bendiga, Kitty —dijo Dorothea, con cálido afecto—. Consuélate: quizá James llegue a perdonarme con el tiempo.

—Pero sería mucho mejor que no te casaras —dijo Celia, secándose las lágrimas y siguiendo con su razonamiento—; entonces no habría de qué preocuparse. Y no harías lo que todo el mundo estaba convencido de que no podías hacer. James siempre ha dicho que deberías ser una reina; pero esto no es en absoluto ser como una reina. Sabes que siempre has cometido equivocaciones, Dodo, y esta es una más. Nadie cree que el señor Ladislaw sea un buen marido adecuado para ti. Y tú dijiste que no volverías a casarte.

—Es cierto que podría ser más prudente, Celia —dijo Dorothea—, y quizá hacer algo mejor, si yo fuese mejor. Pero eso es lo que voy a hacer. He prometido casarme con el señor Ladislaw y me casaré con él.

Celia había aprendido hacía mucho a reconocer el tono de voz con que su hermana pronunció aquellas palabras. Guardó silencio unos instantes y luego dijo, como si hubiera abandonado la lucha:

—¿Te quiere mucho, Dodo?

—Espero que sí. Yo le quiero mucho a él.

—Eso está bien —dijo Celia, satisfecha—. Aunque preferiría que tuvieras un marido como James, y que viviera cerca, en un sitio donde pudiera ir con el coche.

Dorothea sonrió y Celia adoptó una expresión bastante cavilosa. En seguida dijo:

—No acabo de imaginarme cómo ha podido pasar todo. —Celia pensaba que sería agradable oír la historia.

—Estoy segura de que no —dijo Dorothea, pellizcando la barbilla de su hermana—. Si supieras cómo ha pasado, no te parecería maravilloso.

—¿No me lo puedes contar? —dijo Celia, poniendo los brazos en una postura muy cómoda.

—No, querida, tendrás que sentir como yo siento, de lo contrario no lo sabrás nunca.

Capítulo LXXXV

> Luego salieron los miembros del jurado, cuyos nombres eran Ciego, Inútil, Malintencionado, Lujurioso, Disoluto, Violento, Orgulloso, Hostil, Mentiroso, Cruel, Aborrecedor de la Luz e Implacable, y todos y cada uno dieron su veredicto personal contra él, y luego decidieron unánimemente declararlo culpable ante el juez. Y antes, mientras estaban solos, el señor Ciego, presidente del jurado, dijo: Veo con toda claridad que este hombre es un hereje. Después dijo el señor Inútil: ¡Eliminemos de la tierra a semejante individuo! De acuerdo, dijo el señor Malintencionado, porque no soporto verlo. Después dijo el señor Lujurioso: No podría aguantarlo. Yo tampoco, dijo el señor Disoluto, porque siempre condenaría mi proceder. Que lo ahorquen, que lo ahorquen, dijo el señor Violento. Un tipo despreciable, dijo el señor Orgulloso. Mi corazón se alza contra él, dijo el señor Hostil. Es un bellaco, dijo el señor Mentiroso. Ahorcarlo es demasiado bueno para él, dijo el señor Cruel. Deshagámonos de él, dijo el señor Enemigo de la Luz. Finalmente, el señor Implacable dijo: Aunque me dieran el mundo entero, no podría reconciliarme con él; en consecuencia, declarémoslo sin dilación reo de muerte.
>
> *El viaje del peregrino*

Cuando el inmortal Bunyan pinta su cuadro de pasiones desencadenadas pronunciando su veredicto de culpabilidad, ¿quién se compadece de Creyente? Un destino, maravilloso y poco común, que algunos de los más grandes hombres no han alcanzado, es saberse inocente ante una multitud exasperada… tener la seguridad de que se nos denuncia únicamente por el bien que hay en nosotros. Es deplorable en cambio el destino del hombre que no puede considerarse mártir aunque esté seguro de que los hombres que lo han lapidado no son más que la encarnación de las más bajas pasiones… de quien sabe que se le lapida no por profesar la justicia, sino por no ser el hombre que aseguraba ser.

Tales eran las ideas que afligían a Bulstrode mientras se preparaba para abandonar Middlemarch e ir a terminar su vida truncada a ese triste refugio que depara la indiferencia de unos rostros desconocidos. La respetuosa y compasiva fidelidad de su mujer le había librado de un temor, pero no evitaba que su presencia misma fuese un tribunal ante el que aún no se atrevía a confesar ni a buscar la deseada defensa. Los subterfugios utilizados con motivo de la muerte de Raffles sostenían su concepción de una Omnisciencia con la que se comunicaba a través de la oración, pero quedaba en su interior un miedo que no le permitía presentarlos a juicio mediante una plena confesión a su mujer: a los actos que había lavado y diluido con razonamientos y motivos interiores y para los que parecía relativamente fácil conseguir un invisible perdón… ¿qué nombre les daría ella? Que Harriet pudiera calificar interiormente aquellos actos de asesinato, incluso sin llegar a decirlo, era algo que el señor Bulstrode no soportaba. Se sentía protegido por sus dudas: sacaba fuerzas de pensar que su mujer no estaba lo bastante segura para pronunciar contra él la peor de las condenas. Algún día, quizá —cuando estuviera muriéndose— se lo contaría todo: en las intensas sombras de aquel momento, cuando ella apretara su mano en la oscuridad cada vez más densa, quizá le escuchara sin rehuir el contacto con él. Quizá; pero la ocultación había sido el hábito más arraigado de su vida y el deseo de confesión carecía de fuerza ante el temor a una humillación más honda.

Bulstrode estaba lleno de tímida preocupación por su mujer, no solo para evitar con ello la severidad de sus juicios, sino porque le afligía mucho verla sufrir. La señora Bulstrode había mandado a sus hijas a un internado de la costa, con el fin de que supieran lo menos posible de aquella crisis. Liberada con su ausencia de la necesidad intolerable de explicar su dolor y de ser testigo de su asustada sorpresa, podía vivir con naturalidad la pesadumbre que todos los días teñía de blanco sus cabellos y daba mayor languidez a su mirada.

—Dime qué cosas te gustaría que hiciera, Harriet —le había pedido Bulstrode—; me refiero a disposiciones acerca de las propiedades. Mi propósito es conservar las tierras que poseo en los alrededores de Middlemarch, y dejártelas como depósito de seguridad para el futuro. Si tienes algún deseo en esta materia, no me lo ocultes.

—Me gustaría que hiciéramos algo por la familia de mi hermano, Nicholas; y creo que estamos obligados a compensar de algún modo a Rosamond y a su marido. Walter dice que el señor Lydgate tiene que dejar Middlemarch, que su clientela ha desaparecido prácticamente y que apenas le queda dinero para instalarse en otro sitio. Preferiría que nosotros nos pasásemos sin algo y compensar de esa forma a la familia de mi pobre hermano.

La señora Bulstrode aludía a lo sucedido únicamente con la frase «compensar de algún modo», sabiendo que su marido la entendería. El banquero tenía un motivo muy concreto, del que su mujer no estaba al corriente, para sentirse incómodo al oír aquella sugerencia y dudó unos instantes antes de contestar:

—No nos es posible llevar a la práctica tu deseo de la forma que propones, querida. El señor Lydgate, puede decirse, ha rechazado cualquier servicio que yo pudiera prestarle en el futuro devolviéndome las mil libras que le dejé. La señora Casaubon le adelantó el dinero con ese propósito. Aquí está su carta.

La carta pareció hacer profunda mella en la señora Bulstrode. El préstamo de la señora Casaubon parecía un reflejo del sentimiento público que daba por sentado que nadie deseaba tener el menor vínculo con su marido. No dijo nada durante algún tiempo; y las lágrimas cayeron una tras otra, y la barbilla le temblaba mientras se las secaba. Bulstrode, sentado frente a ella, sufría al ver desencajado por el dolor aquel rostro que dos meses antes rebosaba lozanía y optimismo. Harriet había envejecido, poniéndose así a la altura del deterioro que habían sufrido las facciones de su marido. Obligado a hacer algún esfuerzo para tratar de consolarla, el señor Bulstrode le explicó:

—Hay otro medio, Harriet, de que podamos ser útiles a la familia de tu hermano, si lo consideras oportuno. Y creo que resultaría beneficioso para ti: sería una ventajosa manera de administrar unas tierras que tengo intención de cederte. —Su mujer lo miró con interés—. En una ocasión Garth pensó en administrar Stone Court para colocar allí a tu sobrino Fred. El ganado seguiría como hasta ahora y los arrendatarios pagarían un porcentaje sobre los beneficios en lugar del alquiler acostumbrado. Sería un comienzo muy conveniente para el muchacho, junto con el trabajo que hace para Garth. ¿No te parece bien?

—Claro que sí —dijo la señora Bulstrode, recuperando un tanto su energía—. El pobre Walter está muy deprimido; haría cualquier cosa que estuviera en mi mano para ayudarlo antes de irme. Siempre nos hemos querido mucho.

—Tendrás que proponérselo tú misma a Garth, Harriet —dijo el señor Bulstrode, a quien no le agradaba lo que tenía que decir, pero deseaba alcanzar la meta propuesta por otras razones además del consuelo de su mujer—. Debes explicarle que la tierra es prácticamente tuya y que no tiene que tratar conmigo. Cualquier comunicación que necesite podrá hacerse a través de Standish. Te digo esto porque Garth renunció a ser mi agente. Puedo darte un documento que redactó él mismo, estipulando las condiciones; bastará con que le propongas que lo acepte en las mismas condiciones. Probablemente dirá que sí, si se lo presentas como una medida en beneficio de tu sobrino.

Capítulo LXXXVI

Le coeur se sature d'amour comme d'un sel divin qui le conserve; de là l'incorruptible adhérence de ceux qui se sont aimés dès l'aube de la vie, et la fraîcheur des vieilles amours prolongées. Il existe un embaumement d'amour. C'est de Daphnis et Chlöe que sont faits Philemon et Baucis. Cette vieillesse là, ressemblance du soir avec l'aurore.[145]

VICTOR HUGO, *L'homme qui rit*

La señora Garth, al oír a Caleb en el pasillo hacia la hora del té, abrió la puerta del salón y dijo:

—Menos mal que ya estás aquí. ¿Has almorzado? —Porque las comidas del señor Garth quedaban muy subordinadas a los «negocios».

—Sí, sí; un buen almuerzo… cordero frío y no recuerdo qué otra cosa más. ¿Dónde está Mary?

—Creo que en el jardín con Letty.

—¿Fred no ha llegado todavía?

—No. ¿Vas a irte otra vez sin tomar el té, Caleb? —dijo la señora Garth, viendo que su distraído marido se volvía a poner el sombrero que acababa de quitarse.

—No, no; solo voy a hablar un minuto con Mary.

Mary estaba en un extremo del jardín, cubierto de hierba, donde había un columpio a buena altura entre dos perales. Llevaba un pañuelo rosa, atado a la cabeza, que sobresalía lo suficiente para protegerle los ojos de los rayos de sol, casi horizontales, mientras columpiaba con gran energía a Letty, que reía y chillaba con todas sus fuerzas.

Al ver a su padre, Mary dejó el columpio y fue hacia él, echándose hacia atrás el pañuelo rosa y sonriéndole desde lejos con la involuntaria sonrisa de placer que produce reunirse con los seres queridos.

—Venía en tu busca, Mary —dijo el señor Garth—. Vamos a pasear un poco.

Mary sabía muy bien que su padre tenía algo especial que decirle: sus cejas formaban un ángulo patético y había una tierna gravedad en su voz, y aquellos detalles ya le resultaban significativos cuando era de la edad de Letty. Mary se cogió de su brazo y dieron la vuelta junto a la hilera de nogales.

—Es triste que debas esperar tanto tiempo para casarte, Mary —dijo el señor Garth; no la miraba a ella, sino al extremo del bastón que empuñaba con la otra mano.

—No será tan triste, padre… tengo intención de pasarlo bien —dijo Mary, riendo—. He sido soltera y feliz durante veinticuatro años y un poco más; imagino que no será necesario que espere otro tanto. —Luego, después de una breve pausa, añadió, con mayor gravedad, volviendo el rostro hacia el de su padre —: Si usted está contento con Fred. —Caleb torció la boca y desvió la cabeza sagazmente—. Vamos, padre; recuerde que lo alabó el miércoles pasado. Dijo que entendía mucho de ganado y que tenía buen ojo para los negocios.

—¿Eso dije? —preguntó Caleb con fingido asombro.

—Sí, lo apunté con sus mismas palabras y anoté la fecha, *Anno Domini* y todo lo demás —dijo Mary—. A usted le gusta que las cosas se apunten con pulcritud. Y su comportamiento con usted, padre, es realmente bueno; lo respeta mucho; y es imposible tener mejor carácter que Fred.

—Ya veo, ya veo; quieres engatusarme para que lo considere un buen partido.

—Desde luego que no, padre. No lo quiero porque sea un buen partido.

—Entonces, ¿por qué?

—Pues porque lo he querido siempre. Nunca me gustará reñir a nadie tanto como a él; y eso es una cosa muy importante en un marido.

—Entonces, ¿estás completamente decidida, Mary? —dijo Caleb, volviendo a su primer tono de voz—. ¿No ha habido ningún cambio desde que las cosas marchan como lo han hecho últimamente? —Caleb quería decir muchas cosas con aquella frase tan vaga—. Porque más vale tarde que nunca. Una mujer no debe forzar su corazón… no sería bueno para nadie.

—Mis sentimientos no han cambiado, padre —dijo Mary, con gran firmeza—. Seguiré queriendo a Fred mientras él me quiera. No creo que ninguno de los dos pueda prescindir del otro o querer más a otra persona, por mucho que la admiremos. Sería una diferencia demasiado grande para nosotros… como cambiar los sitios donde transcurrió nuestra infancia o el nombre de las cosas. Todavía tenemos que esperar mucho tiempo; pero Fred lo sabe.

En lugar de hablar, Caleb se detuvo y hundió el bastón en la hierba del camino. Luego dijo, con viva emoción en la voz:

—Bueno, tengo una noticia para ti. ¿Qué te parecería si Fred fuese a vivir a Stone Court y se ocupara de la finca?

—¿Cómo podría ser una cosa así? —preguntó Mary, asombrada.

—Sería el administrador de su tía Harriet. La pobre mujer ha venido a suplicarme y a rogarme. Quiere hacer algo por ese chico y puede que sea una buena cosa para él. Ahorrando, podrá comprar el ganado poco a poco, y tiene mano para la agricultura.

—¡Qué contento se va a poner Fred! ¡Es demasiado hermoso para ser verdad!

—Pero no olvides —dijo Caleb, volviendo la cabeza admonitoriamente— que la responsabilidad descansa sobre mis hombros y que he de estar pendiente de todo; eso hará que tu madre se preocupe un poco, aunque quizá no diga nada. Fred ha de tener mucho cuidado.

—Quizá sea demasiado, padre —dijo Mary, frenada en su alegría—. No podríamos ser felices dándole a usted nuevos quebraderos de cabeza.

—Qué va, qué va; el trabajo es lo que más me gusta, hija mía, si no resulta una molestia para tu madre. Y luego, si tú y Fred os casáis —aquí la voz de Caleb tembló apenas perceptiblemente—, ese muchacho se asentará y ahorrará; y tú tienes la inteligencia de tu madre y la mía también, de un modo femenino; y sabrás llevarlo bien. Llegará dentro de un rato, por eso quería decírtelo primero, porque imagino que te gustará contárselo a solas. Después también yo podré hablar con él y ver con más detalle cómo están las cosas.

—¡Qué bueno es usted, padre! —exclamó Mary, rodeándole el cuello con los brazos mientras él inclinaba plácidamente la cabeza, dispuesto a dejarse acariciar—. Me gustaría saber si hay alguna otra chica que esté convencida de que su padre es el mejor hombre del mundo

—Tonterías, hija; pensarás que tu marido es el mejor.

—Imposible —dijo Mary, volviendo a su tono habitual—; los maridos son una clase inferior de hombres y hay que llevarlos por el buen camino.

Cuando entraban en la casa con Letty, que había corrido a reunirse con ellos, Mary vio a Fred en el portón del huerto y se dirigió hacia él.

—¡Qué ropa tan elegante llevas, joven manirroto! —dijo Mary, mientras Fred se detenía frente a ella y se quitaba el sombrero con fingida solemnidad—. No aprendes a economizar.

—Siento decepcionarte, Mary —dijo Fred—. No tienes más que mirar los puños de esta chaqueta. Solo consigo parecer respetable a fuerza de mucho cepillado. Estoy reservando tres trajes… uno de ellos para la boda.

—¡Vas a tener un aspecto muy divertido!… como un caballero en un libro de figurines pasados de moda.

—No; todavía se podrán usar dentro de dos años.

—¿Dos años? Sé razonable, Fred —dijo Mary, volviéndose para dirigirse hacia la casa—. No fomentes esperanzas demasiado optimistas.

—¿Por qué no? Se vive mejor con ellas que con las pesimistas. Si no nos podemos casar dentro de dos años, la verdad ya nos resultará de por sí bastante mala cuando llegue el momento.

—Yo recuerdo la historia de un joven caballero que fomentó cierta vez vanas esperanzas y le resultaron perjudiciales.

—Mary, si tienes algo deprimente que decirme, me marcharé a toda velocidad para reunirme con el señor Garth dentro de la casa. No tengo humor. Mi padre está tan deprimido que nuestra casa no parece la misma. No soporto más noticias malas.

—¿Te parecerá una mala noticia que te diga que vas a vivir en Stone Court y a dirigir la granja y a ser extraordinariamente prudente y a ahorrar dinero todos los años hasta que el ganado y los muebles sean tuyos y te conviertas en una distinguida personalidad agrícola, como dice el señor Borthrop Trumbull… más

bien corpulento, mucho me temo, y con el griego y el latín tristemente enmohecidos?

—Todo eso que dices no es más que una tontería, ¿verdad, Mary? —dijo Fred, ruborizándose un poco a pesar de todo.

—Eso es lo que mi padre me acaba de contar y mi padre nunca dice tonterías —replicó Mary, alzando los ojos hacia Fred, mientras él le apretaba la mano sin dejar de andar, hasta casi hacerle daño; pero ella no tenía intención de quejarse.

—Entonces podría convertirme en un tipo maravilloso, Mary, y nos casaríamos en seguida.

—No tan deprisa, señor mío; ¿cómo sabes que yo no voy a retrasar nuestro matrimonio unos cuantos años? Eso te daría tiempo para portarte mal y entonces, si hubiera alguien que me gustase más, tendría una excusa para dejarte plantado.

—Haz el favor de no bromear, Mary —dijo Fred muy serio—. Dime que todo eso es verdad y que te hace feliz… porque me quieres más que a nadie.

—Es todo verdad, Fred, y me siento muy feliz porque te quiero más que a nadie —dijo Mary, repitiendo obedientemente.

Se detuvieron delante de la puerta, bajo el porche de techo muy inclinado, y Fred dijo, casi en un susurro:

—Cuando nos prometimos por vez primera, con la anilla del paraguas, Mary, solías…

El espíritu de la alegría empezó a reír más decididamente en los ojos de Mary, pero el funesto Ben vino corriendo hasta la puerta con Brownie ladrando detrás y, lanzándose contra ellos, dijo:

—¡Fred y Mary! ¿Es que no vais a entrar?… ¿Me puedo comer vuestra ración de tarta?

Finale

Todo límite supone un principio además de un fin. ¿Quién es capaz de decir adiós a unos jóvenes, después de haber pasado mucho tiempo en su compañía, sin desear saber qué ha sido de ellos en años posteriores? Porque un fragmento de vida, por típico que resulte, no forma parte de un tejido uniforme: a veces las promesas no se cumplen y cabe que después de un comienzo entusiasta cunda el desánimo; tal vez fuerzas latentes hallen su oportunidad, tanto tiempo esperada; y quizá un error pasado empuje a una gran recuperación.

El matrimonio, límite último de tantas historias, es además un gran principio, como sucedió con Adán y Eva, que disfrutaron de su luna de miel en el jardín del Edén, pero tuvieron su primer hijo entre las espinas y los cardos del desierto. También es el principio de la épica del hogar… la conquista gradual o la pérdida irremediable de esa completa unión que hace de la madurez la etapa culminante de la vida y convierte la ancianidad en cosecha de dulces recuerdos comunes.

Algunos se ponen en marcha, como los antiguos cruzados, con un glorioso equipaje de esperanza y entusiasmo y se desmoronan por el camino, faltos de paciencia el uno con el otro y también con el mundo.

A todos los que se hayan interesados por Fred Vincy y Mary Garth, les gustará saber que no sufrieron un fracaso semejante, sino que alcanzaron una sólida felicidad compartida. Fred sorprendió a sus vecinos de varias maneras. Se distinguió considerablemente en su zona del condado por sus conocimientos teóricos y prácticos y dio a la imprenta una obra sobre el cultivo de las hortalizas y la economía de los piensos para el ganado que le valió calurosas felicitaciones en reuniones de agricultores. En Middlemarch lo elogiaron con muchas más reservas: la mayoría de sus habitantes se inclinaba a creer que el mérito no era de Fred, sino de su esposa, porque nunca habían esperado que Fred Vincy escribiera sobre nabos y remolacha forrajera.

Pero cuando Mary escribió un librito para sus hijos, llamado *Historias de grandes hombres, tomadas de Plutarco* y se imprimió y fue publicado por Gripp y Cía., de Middlemarch, todo el mundo estuvo de acuerdo en atribuir a Fred el mérito de aquella obra, haciendo notar que había estado en la universidad, «donde se estudia a los antiguos», y que hubiera podido ser clérigo de haberlo decidido así.

De ese modo quedó claro que a la ciudadanía de Middlemarch no se la engañaba nunca y que no había necesidad de alabar a nadie por escribir un libro, ya que el autor era siempre otra persona.

Por lo demás, Fred no se apartó del camino recto, y lo hizo sin ninguna vacilación. Algunos años después de su matrimonio le dijo a Mary que le debía la mitad de su felicidad a Farebrother, por darle un buen empujón en el momento oportuno. No puedo afirmar que no volviera nunca a engañarle su optimismo: el volumen de las cosechas o los beneficios de una venta de ganado quedaban generalmente por debajo de sus previsiones; y siempre se inclinaba a creer que podía ganar dinero con la compra de un caballo que luego salía malo… aunque eso, precisaba Mary, era por supuesto culpa del caballo y no del dictamen de Fred. No perdió su afición a montar, pero muy pocas veces se permitía salir de caza; y cuando lo hacía, era llamativo lo bien que aceptaba las bromas sobre su cobardía a la hora de saltar obstáculos, porque le parecía ver a Mary y a sus hijos sentados sobre el portillo de cinco travesaños o asomando las rizadas cabezas entre seto y cuneta.

El matrimonio tuvo tres hijos varones: a Mary no le disgustaba que fuese así, y cuando Fred expresaba el deseo de tener una hija como ella, le replicaba riendo: «Eso sería una prueba demasiado dura para tu madre». La señora Vincy, en los últimos años de su vida, a pesar del disminuido esplendor de su hogar, se consolaba mucho al advertir que por lo menos dos de los hijos de Fred eran auténticos Vincy y no tenían las «facciones de los Garth». Pero Mary se alegraba en secreto de que el más pequeño se pareciera mucho a lo que Caleb debía de haber sido cuando llevaba ropa infantil, y de que diese muestras de una estupenda

puntería al jugar a las canicas o al tirar piedras para derribar peras maduras.

Ben y Letty Garth, que se convirtieron en tío y tía mucho antes de cumplir los veinte años, discutían con pasión sobre si era más deseable tener sobrinos o sobrinas; cuando Ben insistía en que, sin duda alguna, las chicas valían para menos cosas que los chicos, porque de lo contrario no llevarían siempre falda, cosa que demostraba lo poco que se esperaba de ellas, Letty, que sacaba muchos argumentos de los libros, replicó furiosa que Dios había hecho abrigos de pieles tanto para Adán como para Eva… y se le ocurrió incluso que en Oriente también los hombres usaban faldas. Pero aquel último argumento, al oscurecer la majestad del primero, resultó perjudicial porque Ben respondió con desdén: «¡Peor para ellos!», e inmediatamente apeló a su madre para que dijera si los chicos no eran mejores que las chicas. La señora Garth proclamó la igualdad de todos en materia de travesuras, aunque reconoció que los muchachos eran más fuertes, corrían más y tiraban piedras con mayor precisión y a más distancia. Con aquel solemne dictamen Ben se quedó muy satisfecho, sin importarle la cuestión de las travesuras; pero a Letty le pareció muy mal, porque su sentimiento de superioridad era más fuerte que sus músculos.

Fred nunca se hizo rico: su optimismo no le había llevado a suponerlo; pero poco a poco ahorró lo suficiente para convertirse en propietario del ganado y de los muebles de Stone Court, y el trabajo que el señor Garth ponía en sus manos le hizo superar con desahogo los «años malos» que siempre dificultan la vida de los agricultores. Mary, en la madurez de su maternidad, adquirió una figura tan sólida como su madre; pero, a diferencia de ella, apenas se dedicó de forma expresa a ser profesora de sus hijos, de manera que a la señora Garth le preocupaba que nunca llegaran a poseer unos sólidos fundamentos de gramática y de geografía. Sin embargo, se mostraron bien despiertos cuando fueron a la escuela, quizá porque nada les había gustado tanto como estar con su madre. Fred, al volver a casa en las tardes de invierno, tenía de antemano la agradable visión de un alegre fuego en la chimenea del salón principal, y sentía lástima de otros hombres que no podían tener a Mary por esposa, especialmente del señor Farebrother.

—Era diez veces más digno de ti que yo —le decía ahora a su mujer, con tono magnánimo.

—De eso no cabe la menor duda —respondía Mary—, y por esa razón estaba más capacitado para prescindir de mí. Pero tú… me estremezco al pensar en lo que habrías sido… ¡un vicario con deudas por alquilar caballos y comprar pañuelos de batista!

Si alguien se preocupara de averiguarlo, sería posible descubrir que Fred y Mary todavía viven en Stone Court —que las plantas trepadoras aún lanzan por encima de la hermosa valla de piedra la espuma de sus capullos hasta el huerto, donde se alzan los nogales en hileras majestuosas—, y que en días de sol puede verse a los dos enamorados que se prometieron por vez primera con la anilla del paraguas, plácidamente instalados, con el pelo ya blanco, junto a la ventana abierta desde la que Mary Garth, en tiempos del viejo Featherstone, tenía con frecuencia la misión de ver si llegaba el señor Lydgate.

Lydgate nunca llegó a peinar canas. Murió a los cincuenta, dejando a su mujer y a sus hijos en posición desahogada gracias a un importante seguro de vida. Había logrado hacerse una excelente clientela, yendo y viniendo, de acuerdo con las temporadas, de Londres a un balneario del Continente, y escribió también un tratado sobre la gota, una enfermedad con excelente respaldo económico. Muchos pacientes de buena posición confiaban en su destreza, pero él siempre se consideró un fracasado: no había hecho lo que en un determinado momento se propuso hacer. Sus conocidos lo consideraban digno de envidia por tener una esposa tan encantadora, y jamás sucedió nada que les hiciera cambiar de opinión. Rosamond nunca tuvo otro desliz. Siguió siendo apacible por temperamento, inflexible en sus juicios, continuó amonestando a su marido y fue siempre capaz de contrariarlo mediante estratagemas. Con el paso de los años Lydgate ofreció cada vez menos resistencia, por lo que Rosamond llegó a la conclusión de que había aprendido a valorar sus opiniones; por otro lado, también ella estaba mucho más segura del talento de su marido, ahora que tenía buenos ingresos y, en lugar de la amenazadora jaula en Bride Street, le había proporcionado una casa toda de flores y dorados, a la altura del ave del paraíso a la que Rosamond tanto se parecía. En pocas palabras, Lydgate llegó a ser un hombre de éxito. Pero murió prematuramente de difteria y Rosamond casó en segundas nupcias con un médico rico de avanzada edad, que se encariñó con sus cuatro hijos. La señora Lydgate constituía un espectáculo encantador cuando se paseaba en coche con sus hijas, y a menudo hablaba de su felicidad como de una «recompensa»… nunca decía por qué, pero probablemente pensaba en una recompensa por su paciencia con Tertius, que siguió teniendo momentos de mal humor y que hasta el final soltaba de vez en cuando alguna frase amarga, mucho más memorable que sus posteriores manifestaciones de arrepentimiento. En una ocasión Lydgate llamó a Rosamond su planta de albahaca[146]; y cuando ella le pidió que se lo explicara, Tertius dijo que era una planta que había florecido maravillosamente en el cerebro de un hombre asesinado. Rosamond sabía contestar con placidez pero con energía a semejantes exabruptos. ¿Por qué la había elegido? Era una pena que no se hubiera casado con la

señora Ladislaw, a la que siempre estaba alabando y colocando por encima de ella. Y así terminaba la conversación, con la balanza inclinada a favor de Rosamond. Pero sería injusto omitir que nunca salió de su boca una palabra de desaprobación para Dorothea y que guardó religiosa memoria de la generosidad con que había acudido en su ayuda en la crisis más violenta de su vida.

Dorothea, por su parte, no soñaba con recibir más alabanzas que otras mujeres, y pensaba siempre que si hubiese sido mejor y hubiera tenido más conocimientos podría haber hecho algo de más valor con su vida. Nunca se arrepintió, sin embargo, de renunciar a su posición y fortuna para casarse con Will Ladislaw, y él habría considerado como la mayor vergüenza y el mayor dolor de su vida que semejante cosa llegara a suceder. Estaban unidos por un amor más fuerte que cualquier impulso capaz de desfigurarlo. Dorothea no habría resistido una vida sin grandes afectos, y la que ahora tenía estaba además llena de una actividad benéfica sin la penosa incertidumbre de tener que descubrirla y planearla por sí misma. Will se convirtió en un hombre público volcado en su tarea, trabajó con entusiasmo, en aquellos tiempos en que se iniciaban las reformas, con la juvenil esperanza de alcanzar un bien inmediato (esperanza que se ha visto muy frenada en nuestros días) y logró finalmente que lo enviara al Parlamento un distrito electoral que pagaba sus gastos. Dorothea, dado que existían injusticias, nunca hubiera podido desear nada mejor que ver a su marido en la primera línea de combate y ofrecerle toda su ayuda como esposa. Muchos que la conocían se dolían de que una criatura tan singular por tantos conceptos se hubiese visto absorbida por la vida de otra persona y que solo se la conociera como esposa y madre en un círculo social muy restringido. Pero nadie precisaba qué otra cosa podría haber hecho que estuviese a su alcance… ni siquiera sir James Chettam, que nunca fue más allá de la prescripción negativa de que no debería haberse casado con Will Ladislaw.

Aquella opinión suya no produjo, sin embargo, un extrañamiento duradero; y la forma en que la familia llegó a reconciliarse resultó muy representativa de la manera de ser de todos los interesados. El señor Brooke no podía renunciar al placer de mantener correspondencia con Will y Dorothea y, una mañana en que su pluma había alcanzado un notable grado de fluidez al hablar sobre las perspectivas de la reforma municipal, le fue imposible contenerla y acabó invitándolos a visitarlo en Tipton Grange, ofrecimiento que, una vez escrito, no podía suprimirse sin el sacrificio (difícilmente concebible) de toda una valiosa carta. Durante los meses de aquella correspondencia, el señor Brooke había dado por hecho, o insinuado constantemente, en sus conversaciones con sir James Chettam, que su intención de desvincular la propiedad seguía siendo firme; y el día en que su pluma se atrevió a hacer la audaz invitación, fue expresamente a Freshitt Hall para manifestar que tenía más claras que nunca las razones para dar aquel enérgico paso como precaución contra la presencia de sangre de inferior calidad en el heredero de los Brooke.

Pero aquella misma mañana algo muy especial había sucedido en casa de los Chettam. Celia recibió una carta que la hizo llorar en silencio mientras la leía; y cuando sir James, poco acostumbrado a ver lágrimas en sus ojos, le preguntó inquieto por el motivo, su mujer estalló en unos gemidos como nunca había oído salir de su boca.

—Dorothea ha tenido un niño. Y tú no me dejas ir a verla. Y estoy segura de que quiere verme. Y no sabrá qué hacer con el niño… le saldrá todo al revés. Y los médicos pensaban que podía morirse. ¡Es horrible! ¡Supón que se hubiese tratado de mí y de Arthur, y a Dodo no la hubiesen dejado venir a verme! ¡Me gustaría que fueras menos cruel, James!

—¡Por el amor de Dios, Celia! —dijo sir James, muy afectado—. ¿Qué quieres que haga? Haré lo que me digas. Te llevaré mañana mismo a Londres si así lo deseas. —Y eso era precisamente lo que Celia quería.

El señor Brooke llegó poco después de aquella escena y, al encontrarse con el baronet en el jardín, empezó a charlar con él, ignorante de las noticias que, por alguna razón, sir James no se molestó en comunicarle de inmediato. Pero cuando el dueño de Tipton Grange habló de la vinculación de las propiedades de la forma habitual, exclamó:

—Mi querido señor, no soy quién para decirle lo que tiene que hacer, pero, por mi parte, no movería un dedo en ese asunto. Dejaría que las cosas siguieran como están.

El señor Brooke se quedó tan sorprendido que tardó en darse cuenta del alivio que le producía saber que lo que se esperaba de él era que no hiciera nada en particular.

Puesto que era aquel el deseo de Celia, resultó inevitable que sir James consintiera en reconciliarse con Dorothea y con su marido. Cuando las mujeres se quieren, los hombres aprenden a reprimir su mutua antipatía. A sir James nunca le gustó Ladislaw y Will siempre prefirió disfrutar de la compañía de sir James mezclada con otras: tenían una relación de tolerancia recíproca que solo resultaba fácil cuando Dorothea y Celia estaban presentes.

Quedó tácitamente establecido que el señor y la señora Ladislaw harían al menos dos visitas al año a Tipton Grange, y poco a poco aumentó la hilera de primos de Freshitt Hall que disfrutaban tanto jugando

con los dos que iban de visita a Tipton Grange como si su sangre procediera de una mezcla menos dudosa.

El señor Brooke vivió hasta una edad muy avanzada y sus propiedades pasaron al hijo de Dorothea, que podría haber representado a Middlemarch en el Parlamento, pero que renunció a ello, pensando que le resultaría mucho más fácil expresar sus opiniones si quedaba fuera.

Sir James nunca dejó de considerar un error el segundo matrimonio de Dorothea; y de hecho esa fue la idea tradicionalmente aceptada en Middlemarch, donde se hablaba a la joven generación de la señora Ladislaw como de una muchacha que se casó con un clérigo enfermo, lo bastante viejo para ser su padre y, poco más de un año después de su muerte, renunció a su herencia para casarse con un primo del difunto… tan joven que podría haber sido su hijo, y que no tenía propiedades ni era de buena cuna. Todos aquellos que nunca habían visto a Dorothea opinaban que no podía haber sido «una mujer como es debido», porque de lo contrario no se habría casado ni con uno ni con otro.

Es cierto que aquellos actos determinantes de su vida no fueron idealmente hermosos, sino el extraño resultado de unos impulsos jóvenes y nobles al enfrentarse a los condicionamientos de una sociedad imperfecta, en la que los grandes sentimientos adquieren con frecuencia apariencia de errores y donde una gran fe toma apariencia de ilusión. Porque ninguna criatura tiene tanta fuerza interior suficiente para no verse en gran medida determinada por lo que encuentra a su alrededor. Una nueva Teresa difícilmente tendría la oportunidad de reformar la vida conventual, como tampoco una nueva Antígona emplearía su piedad heroica en atreverse a todo por el entierro de un hermano: el medio en que sus ardientes acciones tomaron forma ha desaparecido para siempre. Pero nosotros, personas insignificantes, con nuestras palabras y actos de cada día estamos preparando la vida de muchas Dorotheas, y algunas quizá tengan que realizar sacrificios mucho más tristes que los de la Dorothea cuya historia conocemos.

Su espíritu tocado de delicadeza dio aún frutos maravillosos, aunque no fueran visibles para muchos. Su intensa fuerza vital, como aquel río cuyo caudal dividió Ciro, se fue gastando en canales que no alcanzaron un gran renombre sobre la tierra. Pero el efecto de su ser sobre las personas de su entorno fue incalculable: porque el crecimiento del bien en el mundo depende en parte de actos que nada tienen de históricos; y que ahora las cosas no nos vayan tan mal como podrían irnos se debe en buena parte a los muchos que vivieron fielmente una vida escondida y descansan en tumbas que nadie visita.



MARY ANN EVANS, GEORGE ELIOT para la historia de la literatura, nació en 1819 en Chilvers Coton (Warwickshire), hija de un agente inmobiliario. A los ocho años se la consideraba ya «fuera de lo normal» por su peculiar inteligencia y brillantez; a los diecisiete confesaba su agnosticismo y su padre, que le había dado una rigurosa educación religiosa, la echó de casa. Subdirectora de la *Westminster Review*, el foro intelectual progresista más importante de su tiempo, fue animada a dedicarse a la literatura por el crítico George Henry Lewes, que llegaría a ser su compañero prácticamente toda la vida: decidieron vivir juntos a pesar de que él estaba casado.

Las primeras novelas de George Eliot recrean ambientes y personajes de su Warwickshire natal, como *Escenas de la vida parroquial* (1857), *Adam Bede* (1859), *El molino del Floss* (1860) o *Silas Marner* (1861). Con la novela histórica *Romola* (1863) inició su etapa de madurez, a la que pertenecen *Felix Holt* (1866), *Middlemarch* (1871-1872) y *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Algunos relatos y novelas cortas como *El velo alzado* (1859) y *El hermano Jacob* (1860) son ejemplo también de su gran ambición y originalidad.

A la muerte de Lewes en 1878, se ocupó de concluir la obra más importante de este, *Problems of Life and Mind*. En 1880 se casó con el agente de bolsa John Walter Cross, pero en diciembre de ese mismo año falleció en Londres.

Notas

[1] Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667), prelado y teólogo inglés. [Esta nota y las siguientes son del traductor]. < <

[2] Robert Peel (1788-1850), ministro del Interior en el gobierno del duque de Wellington. Después de oponerse a conceder a los católicos la libertad religiosa y política, cambió repentinamente de opinión en 1829 y pasó a defender su emancipación. Los disidentes y los no conformistas habían conseguido esas libertades en 1828. < <

[3] Richard Hooker (1554-1600), teólogo inglés, autor del *Tratado sobre las leyes de la política eclesiástica* (publicadas de 1594 a 1662), verdadera suma teológica de la Iglesia de Inglaterra. Según la creencia popular fue desgraciado en su matrimonio por haberse casado con una mujer estúpida y chocarrera. < <

[4] Enriqueta María (1609-1669), reina consorte de Carlos I de Inglaterra. < <

[5] Sir Humphry Davy (1778-1829), científico e inventor británico, autor de *Elements of Agricultural Chemistry* (1813), la obra mencionada en el texto a continuación. < <

[6] Davy descubrió que el maíz germinaba mucho antes en agua con una carga de electricidad positiva que en agua con electricidad negativa. < <

[7] William Wilberforce (1759-1833), estadista, filántropo y escritor religioso inglés; defensor de causas como la reforma de la policía y del sistema penal y de la abolición de la esclavitud. < <

[8] Prólogo de *The Voiage and Travaile of Sir John Mandeville*, (1366). <<

[9] Entre 1811 y la época de la novela, trabajadores descontentos inutilizaron en diversas ocasiones las máquinas con que trabajaban en las fábricas, y arrendatarios con reivindicaciones desatendidas quemaron el grano almacenado en los almiares. Hubo importantes disturbios de ese tipo en el otoño de 1830. <<

[10] Juez de paz, custodio de las listas y actas de las sesiones del tribunal de justicia del condado. <<

[11] Cloe y Estrefón son nombres repetidos en la lírica pastoril. <<

[12] *Female Scripture Characters*, libro de la señora F. F. King publicado en 1813. <<

[13] John C. Loudon (1783-1843), distinguido y prolífico naturalista. <<

[14] Johann F. Oberlin (1740-1826), pastor luterano de Alsacia, filántropo que consagró su vida a transformar su empobrecida parroquia en una comunidad saludable y próspera. <<

[15] Las citas a principio de capítulo sin identificar son de George Eliot. <<

[16] Protagonista de *Opiniones del gato Murr sobre la vida*, de E. T. A. Hoffman (1776-1822). <<

[17] Sir Samuel Romilly (1757-1818), estadista que trabajó por la reforma de los códigos criminal y penal ingleses. <<

[18] El gobierno de Peel y del duque de Wellington cayó en 1830, en gran parte a consecuencia de aceptar las tesis de O'Connell en la cuestión católica (véase nota en pág. 19). <<

[19] *Delia* es el título de una colección de sonetos de Samuel Daniel (1562-1619), publicada en 1592. <<

[20] La consolidación y organización definitiva del anglicanismo (compromiso entre la reforma continental y el catolicismo), llevada a cabo por Isabel de Inglaterra, tuvo como punto doctrinal básico la revisión de la anterior confesión de fe, reduciéndola a treinta y nueve artículos redactados dentro del espíritu de un calvinismo mitigado. <<

[21] Guy Faux (Fawkes), militar y conspirador inglés (1570-1606). Después de convertirse al catolicismo fue el principal agente de la Conspiración de la Pólvora, con la que se pretendía volar el edificio del Parlamento el 5 de noviembre de 1605. Fawkes fue detenido en los sótanos del Parlamento el día antes de la fecha fijada para poner en obra su propósito. <<

[22] Probablemente sir John Stoddart (1773-1856), periodista y director del *New Times* hasta 1826, y objeto de diversas sátiras groseras. <<

[23] Cada cosa a su tiempo / y los nabos en Adviento. <<

[24] Xisuthrus: Noé en el mito babilónico del Diluvio universal. Fi-fo-fum: un ogro. <<

[25] «Disidencia» significa separación de la Iglesia oficial anglicana; incluye el metodismo y el evangelismo. <<

[26] James Bruce (1730-1794) y Mungo Park (1771-1806), exploradores británicos de África. <<

[27] Probablemente Charles Churchill (1731-1764), poeta cuya tumba visitó Byron la víspera de su última salida de Inglaterra camino de Italia. <<

[28] Thomas Fuller (1608-1661), clérigo y escritor inglés. <<

[29] Referencia a Thomas Young (1773-1829), médico, físico y egiptólogo; también erudito clásico y poeta en su juventud. < <

[30] François Joseph Victor Broussais (1772-1838), médico controvertido y profesor de la facultad de medicina de París. < <

[31] La *Historia* de Herodoto comienza con el relato de los fenicios llevándose a Io a Egipto, seguido del de los griegos raptando a la hija del rey de Fenicia y del secuestro de Elena de Troya. Io era hija de Inaco, deidad fluvial de la Argólida. Sacerdotisa de Hera, fue seducida por Zeus, quien la transformó en novilla para disimular su acción y protegerla del enojo de Hera. < <

[32] Julieta, de *Romeo y Julieta*; Imogen, de *Cimbelina*: ambas heroínas shakespeareanas. < <

[33] Flavio Josefo, historiador judío del siglo I. Sir Thomas Culpepper (1578-1662) y su hijo, del mismo nombre, escribieron sobre la usura. Friedrich G. Klopstock (1724-1803), poeta alemán: su *Mesías* era un poema popular y muy traducido a finales del siglo XVIII. < <

[34] Sir Giles Overreach, el malvado de la obra de Philip Massinger (1583-1640) *New Way to Pay Old Debts* (Nueva manera de pagar deudas antiguas, 1625). < <

[35] La expresión inglesa *to wait for dead men's shoes* («esperar por los zapatos de los difuntos») significa «estar pendiente de una herencia». < <

[36] Brenda y Minna Troll, así como Mordaunt Merton y Clement Cleveland, son personajes de *El pirata* (1822), de Walter Scott; Edward Waverley y Flora MacIvor, lo son de *Waverley* (1814), del mismo autor. Olivia y Sophia Primrose, aparecen en *El vicario de Wakefield* (1766), de O. Goldsmith, y Corinne es la heroína de la novela del mismo nombre (1807) de Mme. de Staël. < <

[37] George Eliot se refiere aquí a *Tom Jones* (1749), y a su autor, Henry Fielding (1707-1754). < <

[38] Ya desde el Renacimiento existía en Inglaterra una clara distinción entre médicos *(physicians)* y cirujanos *(surgeons)*. A los médicos se los consideraba miembros de una profesión superior. Los cirujanos eran, en un principio, cirujanos y barberos y su procedencia y sus estudios resultaban mucho menos controlables que los de los médicos. Lydgate, que había renunciado de manera deliberada a estudiar en Oxford o Cambridge (las universidades que daban el título de doctor en Medicina), más preocupado por aprender que por figurar, entraba en la categoría de cirujano, que había incluido hasta entonces la función de farmacéutico o boticario. Estas distinciones han desaparecido posteriormente en Inglaterra, al igual que en España. <<

[39] *Chrysal or the Adventures of a Guinea*, narración satírica de Charles Johnstone, publicada de 1760 a 1765. <<

[40] Edward Jenner (1749-1823), médico inglés descubridor de la vacuna. <<

[41] Referencia a Cambridge y Oxford y al Royal College of Physicians (Real Colegio de Médicos). <<

[42] Sir William Herschel (1738-1822), astrónomo inglés de origen alemán que empezó su carrera como profesor de música. <<

[43] De acuerdo con la ley de farmacéuticos de 1815, que capacitaba a estos últimos para practicar la medicina junto con los médicos y cirujanos, los tribunales de justicia sentenciaron que un profesional de la medicina podía prescribir medicamentos, pero no estaba obligado a administrar los suyos propios. <<

[44] Marie François Xavier Bichat (1771-1802), anatomólogo y fisiólogo francés. <<

[45] *Coroner*: funcionario de justicia que se encarga de investigar las muertes repentinas, violentas o sospechosas y sus causas. <<

[46] *The Lancet*, revista de medicina fundada por Thomas Wakley en Londres en 1823. George Eliot se documentó en ella para escribir *Middlemarch*. <<

[47] Pierre Charles Louis (1787-1872), médico francés, autor de un importante trabajo sobre la tuberculosis pulmonar, que propugnó la utilización del llamado método numérico en medicina, base de la estadística biológica moderna. < <

[48] Poema de Thomas Moore (1779-1852), muy popular, publicado en 1817. < <

[49] El botánico inglés más importante de la época. El ensayo que menciona Lydgate *(Microscopic Observations on the Pollen of Plants)* se publicó en 1828. < <

[50] Sofista griego (siglo V a. de C.), autor de *La elección de Hércules*, en la que el héroe, en una encrucijada, se encuentra con las figuras del Placer y del Deber. Pródico hace que Hércules elija el Deber. < <

[51] Mirad a aquella que suspira y hace / de la mano, con la palma, para su mejilla, un lecho. < <

[52] Referencia a la escuela nazarena alemana, emparentada con los prerrafaelistas ingleses de época algo posterior. < <

[53] Sacerdote o ministro. < <

[54] En efecto, en efecto. < <

[55] *Der Neffe als Onkel* (El sobrino como tío), comedia de Schiller; *ungeheuer*: «monstruoso». < <

[56] Dioses samotracios de la fertilidad. < <

[57] Shakespeare, *Los dos hidalgos de Verona*, V, IV, 79. < <

[58] Hablamos largamente; era sencilla y buena. / Desconociendo el mal, hacía el bien; / de las riquezas de su corazón me dio limosna, / y mientras escuchaba cómo el corazón se da, / sin atreverme a pensarlo, le di el mío; / se me llevó la vida, y no lo supo nunca. <<

[59] Conyers Middleton (1683-1750), teólogo y miembro del claustro del Trinity College, en Cambridge, cuya obra *A Free Inquiry into the Miraculous Powers which are Supposed to Have Subsisted in the Christian Church* (Libre examen de los poderes milagrosos que supuestamente han subsistido en la Iglesia cristiana, 1749) fue muy controvertida. <<

[60] Albert Bertel Thorwaldsen (1770-1844), escultor danés, residente en Roma durante muchos años; la influencia de los pintores nazarenos alemanes le llevó a rechazar algunas de sus ideas neoclásicas en favor del «purismo» prerrafaelista. <<

[61] Chapucero. <<

[62] El único joven de la mitología que ve a Hades, dios de los infiernos, es Eros o Cupido. Su madre, Afrodita, lo convence para que le lance sus flechas, y Hades se enamora de Perséfone, llevándosela a su mundo subterráneo. <<

[63] El minotauro cretense se alimentaba de vírgenes. <<

[64] Jacob Bryant (1715-1804), anticuario británico, que escribió *Un nuevo sistema o análisis de la mitología antigua*. <<

[65] Dos hijos de Cam, hijo de Noé; se los supone antepasados epónimos de Etiopía y Egipto. <<

[66] Lindley Murray (1745-1826) y la señora Richmal Mangnall (1769-1820), autores de libros de texto muy utilizados a principios del siglo XIX en Inglaterra. <<

[67] Referencia a la semejanza entre las palabras *sheep* (oveja) y *ship* (barco) que, al pronunciarlas, solo se

diferencian por la longitud de la vocal. <<

[68] Hester Lynch Piozzi (1741-1821), amiga del doctor Johnson, autora de *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* (Anécdotas del difunto Samuel Johnson, 1786). <<

[69] Shakespeare, soneto 23. <<

[70] Literalmente «prenda» o «recuerdo», una de las publicaciones literarias anuales del siglo XIX; de ordinario contenía prosa, versos sentimentales e ilustraciones un tanto anodinas. <<

[71] Marguerite Power, condesa de Blessington (1789-1849) y Letitia Elizabeth Landon (1803-1838), populares novelistas inglesas de los años veinte y treinta del siglo XIX. <<

[72] Probablemente versos de la misma George Eliot. <<

[73] *Parerga*: en griego, «obras secundarias». <<

[74] *College* de Oxford. <<

[75] Probablemente William Warburton (1698-1779), obispo y autor de obras sobre temas literarios y teológicos. <<

[76] Hombres que nunca perecerán. <<

[77] *Macbeth*, acto I, escena viii. <<

[78] Quien quiere distraerse sin propósito concreto, se cansa. < <

[79] Probablemente referencia a Jeanne de Montmorenci, heroína de *La solitaire des Pyrénées* (La solitaria de los Pirineos, 1802), novela histórica de Sabatier de Castres, que abandona la casa de su padre para no casarse y se consagra a obras de caridad, dando todo lo que tiene a los pobres. < <

[80] Lucrecio, *De rerum natura*, I, 633-634. < <

[81] Teseo abandona a Ariadna en Naxos después de haberse servido de ella en Creta. < <

[82] La tierra de los gigantes de *Los viajes de Gulliver*. < <

[83] George Borrow (1803-1881), viajero inglés, agente de la Sociedad Bíblica británica y extranjera, autor de *The Zincali, or An Account of the Gypsies of Spain* (El zincali, o crónica de los gitanos de España, 1841) y de *The Bible in Spain* (La Biblia en España, 1843). < <

[84] Harpagón: el protagonista de *El avaro* (1668) de Molière. < <

[85] *Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci*: Quien une lo instructivo con lo agradable se lleva la palma (*Arte poética* de Horacio). < <

[86] No, no se me ocurre placer más agradable / que ver un afligido grupo de herederos, / con aire desconcertado y caras largas,/ leer un testamento que además de dejarlos sorprendidos y pálidos, / les lega un adiós con un palmo de narices. / Para ver sin disimulos su profunda tristeza, / creo que volvería, ex profeso, del otro mundo. < <

[87] Jorge IV murió el 26 de junio de 1830, y le sucedió en el trono el duque de Clarence, Guillermo IV. < <

[88] A Charles Grey (1764-1845) se le nombró primer ministro en noviembre de 1830, y su gobierno presentó la primera gran ley de reforma electoral en la Cámara de los Comunes en 1831. En 1832, a pesar del obstruccionismo *tory* en la Cámara de los Lores, se logró aprobar la ley en un segundo intento. < <

[89] Fox (1719-1806), estadista inglés y reformador liberal, líder de los *whigs* a finales del siglo XVIII. < <

[90] William Huskisson (1770-1830), estadista *tory* de los años veinte. Al igual que Peel, apoyó la reforma electoral solo cuando la presión social iba a imponerla de manera inevitable, ya fuera dentro de la legalidad o por medio de la violencia. < <

[91] *Delectus*: selección de pasajes de autores griegos y latinos para hacer ejercicios de traducción. < <

[92] Probablemente Robert Lowth (1710-1787), obispo, hebraísta y profesor de poesía en Oxford. < <

[93] Es en gran medida como el juicio de los hombres sobre las acciones humanas; antes o después, llega a ser eficaz. < <

[94] Lord Henry Brougham (1778-1868), estadista británico y liberal de la escuela de Bentham, uno de los fundadores de la *Edimburgh Review* en 1808 y de la Sociedad para la Difusión del Saber Útil en 1825. < <

[95] *Modus decimandi*: pago en metálico en lugar del diezmo. < <

[96] Jacques Lafitte (1767-1844), estadista francés, líder de la revolución de 1830. < <

[97] *Fiat justitia et ruat mundus*: «Hágase justicia aunque se hunda el mundo». La frase no es de Horacio, aunque se hizo muy popular en Inglaterra en el siglo XVI. < <

[98] Dulcifica las costumbres. <<

[99] Literalmente, «Fin del hombre libre». <<

[100] Cita adaptada de *Urn Burial* (1658), de Thomas Browne. <<

[101] Personaje de *El Paraíso perdido*, de Milton. <<

[102] *Lamb*, cordero; *B.A., Bachelor of Arts*, licenciado en letras; *Ba*, onomatopeya del balido. <<

[103] William Huskisson, político *tory*, resultó gravemente herido al caerse de un andén en el curso de la inauguración del Ferrocarril de Manchester y Liverpool en 1830. <<

[104] René Théophile Hyacinthe Laënnec (1781-1826), cardiólogo francés. <<

[105] Imogen es la heroína de *Cimbelino*, de Shakespeare; la hija de Catón, Marcia, es la heroína del *Catón* de Addison. <<

[106] Probablemente el «viejo poeta» es la misma George Eliot. <<

[107] William Burke y su cómplice William Hare asfixiaban a sus víctimas y vendían los cadáveres para hacer prácticas de disección. <<

[108] St John Long (1798-1834), charlatán y pretendido médico, se estableció en Londres en 1827; fue juzgado dos veces por homicidio, ya que dos de sus pacientes murieron a causa del tratamiento a que los sometió. <<

[109] François Vincent Raspail (1794-1878), químico, fisiólogo y figura política radical. < <

[110] Andrés Vesalio (1514-1564), fundador de la anatomía moderna. Su gran obra, *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543), fue recibida con hostilidad por los seguidores de Galeno. < <

[111] Asociaciones creadas a comienzos de los años treinta en favor de la reforma electoral. < <

[112] «Mezcla, mezcla…», canción tradicional que aparece en *The Witch* (La Bruja), de Thomas Middleton, y más adelante en *Macbeth* como acotación escénica añadida. < <

[113] Edward Stanley (1799-1869), decimocuarto conde de Derby, ministro para Irlanda en el gabinete de lord Grey. < <

[114] Colección de himnos de John Keble (1792-1866), publicada en 1827, que alcanzó enorme popularidad. < <

[115] En el Apocalipsis de san Juan, Gog y Magog simbolizan los poderes terrenales que se enfrentarán en un último combate con el pueblo de Dios. < <

[116] Hugh Latimer (1485-1555), famoso predicador inglés, autor de sermones sencillos y sin pretensiones. < <

[117] Aquellas elecciones no despertaron interés nacional y, como no era necesario que los candidatos invitaran a los posibles votantes a bebidas alcohólicas, se las llamó «elecciones secas». < <

[118] En la nueva ley electoral el derecho a voto se concedía a quienes ocupaban propiedades con impuestos iguales a diez libras al año. < <

[119] La cita no es de *The Rambler*, famosa colección de ensayos de Samuel Johnson, sino de los primeros versos de su poema *The Vanity of Human Wishes*. < <

[120] John C. Spencer, vizconde Althorpe (1782-1845), líder de la oposición *whig* durante el gobierno de Wellington (1828-1830) y ministro de Hacienda con lord Grey (1830-1834). < <

[121] Warren Hastings (1732-1818), político inglés que llegó a ser gobernador general de la India. < <

[122] *Old Nick*, el demonio. < <

[123] En los ojos lleva mi señora Amor, / que hace agradable todo lo que mira: / cuando pasa, todos los hombres se vuelven, / al que saluda le tiembla el corazón, / e inclinando el rostro, avergonzado, / de todos sus defectos se lamenta suspirando: / huyen ante ella Soberbia e Ira. / Ayudadme, señoras, a rendirle homenaje. / Dulzura y humildes pensamientos / nacen en el corazón de quien la oye hablar; / y así es feliz quien la vio primero. / Su belleza cuando sonríe apenas, / no es posible explicarla, ni recordarla luego, / por ser un milagro nuevo lleno de gracia. < <

[124] Referencia a *Waverley*, que George Eliot leía en 1827, a la edad de ocho años. < <

[125] Richard Porson (1759-1808), estudioso inglés dedicado al cultivo de los clásicos. < <

[126] Alusión a la novela de Oliver Goldsmith *El vicario de Wakefield* (1766), cuyo héroe es un clérigo simpático y bonachón. < <

[127] Durante los años veinte del siglo XIX se crearon institutos para la educación de los trabajadores, movimiento social que alcanzó una rápida difusión. < <

[128] Shakespeare, *Enrique IV*, parte II, III, ii. < <

[129] Grinling Gibbons (1648-1721), nombrado maestro tallista de la corona inglesa durante el reinado de Carlos II, conservó el cargo hasta su muerte, acaecida durante el reinado de Jorge I. <<

[130] Probable alusión a Guido Reni (1575-1642), maestro de la escuela boloñesa. <<

[131] Nicolaes Berghem (1620-1683), paisajista danés. <<

[132] Abraham Slender, joven estúpido, personaje de *Las alegres comadres de Windsor*. <<

[133] El apoyo de Wellington a los protestantes no conformistas (1828) y a la emancipación de los católicos (1829). <<

[134] Cita de *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751), de Thomas Gray (1716-1771). <<

[135] Obra de Samuel Johnson (1759). <<

[136] Según Apuleyo, Psique era hija de un rey. Eros la llevó a un palacio encantado, en el que la visitaba todas las noches, y le prometía dicha eterna con tal de que no intentase ver el rostro de su amante. <<

[137] Thomas Ken (1637-1711), obispo anglicano y autor de textos devotos; John Tillotson (1630-1694), teólogo y predicador, más tarde arzobispo de Canterbury. <<

[138] John Ware (1795-1864), médico estadounidense, autor de un trabajo titulado «Remarks on the History and Treatment of Delirium Tremens», publicado en *Transactions of the Massachusetts Medical Society* (1831). <<

[139] La conciencia de lo engañoso de los placeres presentes, y el desconocimiento de la vanidad de los

ausentes, llevan a la inconstancia. < <

[140] … *haunted her like a passion*: Wordsworth, *Tinten Abbey* (1798). En el verso original el pronombre es *me*. < <

[141] Gilbert White (1720-1793), rector de Selborne, escribió *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* (1789), colección de cartas dirigidas a dos amigos, en las que incluía muchas observaciones sobre la flora y la fauna de su villa natal. < <

[142] Tú, Tierra, también fuiste constante esta noche, / me diste aliento reviviendo a mis pies. / Ya empiezas a rodearme de nuevo de deseo, / estimulas y excitas la poderosa decisión / *de buscar constantemente una existencia mejor*. (Traducción de Miguel Salmerón, Espasa Calpe, Madrid, 1998). < <

[143] Sobre todo de un partidario de los Estuardos durante la guerra civil. < <

[144] George Jeffreys (1648-1689), juez inglés, célebre por su severidad y conducta poco acorde con su cargo. < <

[145] El corazón se satura de amor como de una sal divina que lo conserva; de ahí la unión incorruptible de los que se han amado desde el alba de la vida, y la frescura de los amores prolongados. Existe un embalsamamiento por amor. Filemón y Baucis están hechos de Dafnis y Cloe. Es esta una vejez que tiene con la juventud la semejanza del crepúsculo con la aurora. < <

[146] Referencia a un poema de Keats, *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil*, basado en uno de los relatos de Boccaccio en el *Decamerón*. < <